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# The Black Freedom Struggle and Civil Rights Labor Organizing in the Piedmont and Eastern North Carolina Tobacco Industry

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The Black Freedom Struggle and Civil Rights Labor Organizing in the Piedmont and  
Eastern North Carolina Tobacco Industry

by

Jennifer Wells

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Africana Studies  
College of Arts and Science  
University of South Florida

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African Americans, Working Class, Labor Unions, Racism, South

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my hero and savior Jesus Christ, along with my mom Vickie D. Wheeler. With Jesus nothing is impossible and my mountains are cast into the sea. Mom picked up my broken pieces many of times, especially throughout the last couple of years. She led me in God's truth and taught me to stand firm in what I believe in. Thus, because of Heaven and Mom, I will not be shaken or moved.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to thank Dr. Eric D. Duke for sharing his knowledge and no nonsense approach to our field of study, which influenced me to become a better scholar and pursue a career in academia. When I had a rough semester because of life's curve balls, he worked with me when I was so close to giving up. For that I will be eternally grateful. Moreover, I want to acknowledge the African American men and women that worked in North Carolina's tobacco industry throughout the Piedmont and eastern region of the state during the early to mid-twentieth century. If it were not for their labor organizing efforts to challenge race based degradation then this thesis would not be possible. Lastly, without the University of South Florida's entire Africana Studies faculty and my 2011-2013 cohorts, I would not have found my place; 'Black Power' through unity.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines labor organizing in the U.S. South, specifically the Piedmont and eastern regions of North Carolina in the mid-twentieth century. It aims to uncover an often overlooked local history of the black freedom struggle and civil rights labor organizing which challenged the southern status quo before America's 'mainstream' civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. This study argues that through labor organizing, African American tobacco workers challenged the class, gender, and race hierarchy of North Carolina's very profitable tobacco industry during the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing, the thesis contributes to the historiography of black working class protest, and the ever-expanding field of local civil rights histories and the long civil rights movement.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of the history of the United States included the exploitation of the ‘other.’ For centuries, African American labor was blatantly misused and abused to help construct the ‘great white nation’ of America. From slavery, through the post-emancipation era, and well into the twentieth century, African Americans have faced widespread racism and discrimination, including segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching, inequalities in housing, health care, jobs and wages. Nevertheless, throughout these years, there is a long history of black protest in pursuit of full freedom and self-determination, among other goals. Despite serious challenges to their inclusion for several decades, labor organizing by black workers proved to be a useful avenue to challenge race based degradation. In this study, the term “civil rights labor organizing” represents the collective efforts of black workers to better working conditions and obtain the guaranteed rights of American citizenship.

My study draws from and builds upon various secondary works on civil rights labor organizing. This includes, among others, Robert Rodger Korstand’s *Civil Right Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South*, Barbara S. Griffith’s *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*, Leslie Brown’s *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* and Robert Zieger’s *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* and *The CIO: 1935-1955*. Local studies by Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, “Putting Our Heads Together: The African American Railroad and Tobacco Workers Campaigns of the 1940s and

1950s and the Organizing Tradition in Eastern North Carolina,” Lane Windham, “Greenhands: A History of Local 10 of the Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Allied Workers of America in Greenville, NC, 1946,” and Beverly W. Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class: Black Female Tobacco Workers in Durham, North Carolina, 1920-1940, and the Development of Female Consciousness,” also reflect local grassroots activism through labor organizing agendas and were beneficial in the foundation of this study.

This study also draws upon various primary sources on black workers and union activities in mid-twentieth century North Carolina. Major archival collections include the Arthur Vance Cole Papers located at Duke University, and the C.I.O. Organizing Committee Papers found at North Carolina State University. The various interviews with black tobacco workers held in the Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill were particularly helpful. Finally, relevant local and national periodicals such as the *Chicago Defender*, *Crisis*, *Rocky Mount Evening Telegram*, and the *Wilson Daily Times* were used.

The thesis includes four chapters that examine African American efforts to counter discrimination, disenfranchisements, and ostracization through civil rights labor organizing. Chapter One provides an overview of black labor organizing from the post-emancipation years to the early decades of the twentieth century. It highlights the connections between the poor economic status of most black workers in the U.S. South, including limited employment opportunities, and challenges to the institutional racism which formed the status quo of many communities. To do so, this chapter examines the inequalities of the black working class. This includes the rise of racial tension and the Jim Crow system in the post-Civil War South,



particularly in North Carolina, and the influence of black migration on North Carolina's population and the Piedmont's tobacco industry.

Due to the influx of black laborers to urban and industrial centers, North Carolina's tobacco industry prospered in the early twentieth century. Piedmont tobacco companies, however, reflected extensions of the class, gender, and race hierarchy of the post-Civil War South. Chapter Two examines the rise and fall of segregated unionism in the North Carolina Piedmont tobacco industry during the early decades of the twentieth century. This includes an examination of labor organizing efforts and black workers on a national scale from the 1920s-1940s, the genesis of more local black labor organization in the Piedmont tobacco industry, and the various challenges and inequalities faced by the black working class in the area's tobacco factories. These discussions set the stage for the 1943 rise of civil rights activism through local labor organizing within R.J. Reynolds, a North Carolina Piedmont tobacco factory.

Chapter Three examines the 1943 strike at R.J. Reynolds in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This chapter evaluates the ties between local black labor organizing and civil rights activism during this event. It links the class, gender, and racial hierarchy of the U.S. South to the prejudices black workers faced inside the Reynolds' factory. Within this discussion, the chapter investigates the discriminatory events that led up to the 1943 Reynolds employee protest, union influence and actions during the actual strike, and black workers' collectivism to challenge the southern status quo.

Chapter Four explores the latter half of the 1940s and the large-scale efforts of national unions such as the CIO and AFL to organize eastern North Carolina's tobacco industry workers. This includes "Operation Dixie," which the CIO launched in late 1945 as part of their post-World War II efforts to unionize industries in the notorious anti-union and low wage U.S. South.

Although Operation Dixie provided the financial backing and agency needed to unionize, it was black organizers from the Piedmont that built rapport and trust with eastern North Carolina's tobacco leaf house workers. The challenging economic conditions faced by many African American workers in previous decades and other regions of North Carolina continued in the eastern North Carolina counties, as did their efforts to fight for better lives.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**BLACK ORGANIZING AND THE FIGHT FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC**  
**INCLUSION**

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-consciousness manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>1</sup>

Doors of opportunity that W.E.B. Du Bois references in the above quote referred to the equal chance for African Americans to participate in the ideals of American democracy. An equal voice over decisions that affect livelihood has been denied to African decedents ever since European imperialists began to colonize Africa and the Americas in the fifteenth century. Throughout the United States' history, in an effort to counter discrimination, disenfranchisements, and ostracization, many blacks aimed to gain access to civil liberties through labor organizing. The purpose of the following chapter is to provide a broad background on the relationship between the themes of the black economic condition, limited employment opportunity, and challenges to the mainstream status quo from the post-emancipation years to the early decades of the twentieth century. To do so, this chapter examines the background of the

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Company, 1903), 2-3.

black working class, the rise of racial tensions and Jim Crow in the post-Civil War U.S. South, along with the influence that migration had over North Carolina's population and the Piedmont's tobacco industry.

### **Background of the Black Working Class**

The future was uncertain for African descendants that lived in the U.S. during the mid-nineteenth century. Slave owners, those that aspired to be slave owners, slaves, free blacks, abolitionists, and politicians knew that if the South lost the Civil War then the normalcy of American life would considerably change. Regardless of location, American whites abhorred the idea of economic calamity rendered by war. For slaves and free blacks, the anticipation of cultural, political, social, and economic freedom was welcomed. Skeptically, African Americans envisioned post-war years as a time to have assertion over the physical body, stabilize the home, establish black schools and churches, participate fully within political and social spheres, and take control over work environments through "free labor."<sup>2</sup>

The paradox between the ideals of democracy and the reality of African American 'otherness' remained apparent post-emancipation. In 1865, the North's success in the war brought liberty to those enslaved. Unfortunately, African American victory celebrations did not last long as the overwhelmed feeling of joy soon turned into a state disillusionment. The Reconstruction period left approximately four million ex-slaves with no blueprint for their role in

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<sup>2</sup> Antoinette G. van Zelm, "Hope Within a Wilderness of Suffering: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom During the Civil War and Reconstruction in Tennessee," Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.tn4me.org/pdf/TransitionfromSlaverytoFreedom.pdf>; Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 10.

America's political or socio-economic circuits. Robert Zeiger notes, whether north or south of the Mason Dixon line, blacks were unjustly differentiated due to dominate "attitudes and legal structures" of white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, African Americans faced dire economic circumstances alongside the various cultural, political, and social issues that thwarted efforts to achieve self-determination and autonomy.<sup>4</sup> The working environment reflected discriminatory extensions of the American system.

America's white working class "was torn between regarding the racial 'others' as" wage earner competitors or "fellow workers in a common struggle to achieve rising material standards and civic identity," during the Reconstruction years. No official divisions separated work based on race as blacks and whites often labored in similar jobs. Yet, "the status and compensation" associated with labor "followed the color line."<sup>5</sup> Under these circumstances, African Americans toiled in the most dangerous, least desired, and poorest paid occupations. Satirically, unskilled labor was reclaimed as 'white work' in times of economic hardship.

As the American working class expanded in the post-war period, the initial white resentment against African Americans in the workplace also grew. One result of these attitudes was the general policy to exclude African Americans from labor unions or, at best, offer restrictive membership. As Herman D. Bloch states, white workers wanted to "restrict competition so as to safeguard job monopoly." In 1866, the NLC (National Labor Congress)

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 23; Quoted in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 17; Aimin Zhang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement, 1865-1956* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 22.

stood firm on the sentiment that black laborers were inferior to white workers. This position was legitimized by denying race as the cause for subordination. Rather, a deficiency of jobs was deemed the problem. Furthermore, the NLC blamed labor discrimination on industrialization and not unionism because “race prejudices existed long before the factory system and collective bargaining.” The organization declared that labor unions only protect jobs for unionists “and did not invent discrimination.” Instead, unions re-articulated a new fashion “of what had slowly pervaded the social structure and consciousness of social groups since the Negro,” under peculiar degrees, “made his appearance in the United States.” Furthermore, between 1866 and 1945, most affiliates of the AFL (American Federation of Labor), along with a few independent unions, devised restrictive policies that ranged from total black exclusion to “FULL ACCEPTANCE OF NEGRO MEMBERSHIP,” which Bloch regards as “a misleading phrase.”<sup>6</sup> Glenda Gilmore states, in *Gender and Jim Crow*, that during the late 1880s, “five and a half percent of” African Americans that lived in North Carolina “worked in saw mills, in brick factories, as carpenters, or as stone and marble cutters.” Approximately 2,000 of these laborers belonged to chapters of the Knights of Labor, which was one of the largest labor organizations in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The union’s ‘full acceptance’ of black employees, however, entailed a strict code of segregated chapters for Knights of Labor locals in the South.

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<sup>6</sup> Herman D. Bloch, “Craft Unions and the Negro in Historical Perspective,” *The Journal of Negro History* 43, no.1 (1958):10; Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 10-11 and 56.

<sup>7</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 22.

On the other hand, there were prominent labor unionists that believed in and practiced inclusiveness. In the post-war early years, famed organizer Richard Trevellick insisted that abolitionists fought to “free ‘the *black* laborer, and now we are going to protect the Laborer, North and South, labor everywhere.” Around the same time, Ira Steward, a labor rights advocate, proclaimed, “The brotherhood of labor is universal;” it “embraces all classes of workingmen of every degree and color.” Moreover, labor reformers established the first national labor federation, the NLU (National Labor Union), in 1866. The organization’s instituting document, *The Address of the National Labor Union Congress to the Workingmen of the United States*, furthered the “idea that the interests of labor are one; that there should be no distinction of race.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, neither Karl Marx nor Fredrick Engles thought of the Civil War “as a socialist revolutionary war;” but, rather as an opportunity to empower proletarians.<sup>9</sup> In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx states that “every independent movement” from U.S. workers was “paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic.” Even more, “the first evidence of biracial unionism” was hailed by Marx as he asserts, “Labour cannot emancipate its self in the white skin where in the black it is branded.”<sup>10</sup>

In December 1869, Isaac Myers, a free born African American, became the executive head over the NCLU (National Colored Labor Union). From the start, the NCLU was indecisive about focused attention on political or union matters, along with “cooperation with and

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<sup>8</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Donny Schraffenberger, “Karl Marx and the American Civil War,” *ISR International Social Review Online Edition* 80, (November-December 2011), accessed March 3, 2013, <http://www.isreview.org/issues/80/feat-civilwar.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (New York: Modern Library, 1906), 329.

estrangement from the NLU and other” white based unions. However, the NCLU welcomed skilled and unskilled working men and women. On the surface, the union “was the most inclusive early postbellum” organization. Myers’ vision for the NCLU included racial uplift through educational programs for newly freed slaves, a medium between employers and employees, and awareness of racial inequalities in the workplace.<sup>11</sup> Peter Humphries Clark, also an African American, was disheartened at the amount of discrimination associated with the growth of post-war American capital. He was “especially outraged” at the inequalities that “fellow African Americans in the South” faced. According to Clark, capitalists in the South merged “together over the poor whites” but carefully calculated the exact amount required “to feed the black laborer and keep him alive from one year to another.” In 1876, Clark renounced his Republican Party allegiance and founded the first Socialist Party in America, the WPUS (Workingmen’s Party of the United States). From 1877-1930, and “especially between 1910 and 1930,” prominent black socialists, such as A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Alan Moore and others, sought to establish black unions and “projects of greater self-reliance.”<sup>12</sup> It was difficult to gain the support of black laborers since the majority of the African American population resided in U.S. southern states. Escalated racism from the white working class and southern aristocrats stifled many socialists and biracial unions’ political agendas and labor organizing efforts.

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<sup>11</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Winston James, “Being Red and Black in Jim Crow America: Notes of the Ideology and Travels of Afro-America’s Socialist Pioneers, 1877-1930,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture & Society*, 1 no 4 (1999): 47.



## **The South: Separate Spheres as the Hatred Rises**

Southern defeat in the Civil War, combined with freed ex-slaves, ignited a major increase in southern racial tension. The rise of hatred ultimately led to the divide of black and white spheres as the South became an exorbitantly vicious area, which hewed a strict status quo of racial segregation. It is true that the North had its share of race based issues, but the South's militant stance against integration grew into a significant attribute of southern identity. The rise of Jim Crow was a discommodate system of oppression and racial terrorism. As southerners sought to hold on to hierarchal power in a post-slavery society, many whites joined, or supported, white supremacy groups. White supremacists desperately used any means necessary to keep the 'other' subordinate. African American workers encountered hostilities alongside the rise of Jim Crow and black political exclusion. Harvard Sitkoff recalls the slogan of a turn of the century white supremacist group from Atlanta, Georgia, called the Black Shirts, was, "No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job!"<sup>13</sup> Other racist associations had similar chants, such as, "Niggers, back to the cotton fields – city jobs are for white folks." In addition, the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan, in the 1920s, and spiked numbers of lynching demonstrated the contempt that the majority of southern whites had for African Americans. Moreover, a 1931 article, found in the *New Republic*, written by journalist Hilton Butler, notes, "Dust had been blown from the shotgun, the whip, and the noose, and Ku Klux practices were being resumed in the certainty that dead men not only tell no tales but create vacancies;" 'Vacancies' in this excerpt referred to job openings. Sitkoff claims that in 1931 one-third of southern blacks could find no employment in the South's urban districts. One year later, the black unemployed number

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<sup>13</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 36; Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 107.

rose to over half. Unfortunately, Sitkoff failed to mention the population number of African Americans that resided in the South during 1931. Yet, the author relays that “cities and states set harsher standards for” blacks to receive public assistance than for whites.<sup>14</sup> Implausibly, many religious and charity organizations refused to financially assist, or even feed, impoverished blacks.

Racial terrorism manifested when whites destroyed African American communities, raped black women, and drove African Americans out of areas designated as white homelands. Since Jim Crow laws meant that court juries would consist of all white citizens, police inflicted bodily harm to many African Americans with no consequence. Gilmore notes that there was a “rising tide of lynching” throughout the South.<sup>15</sup> Paul Ortiz supports this claim as he states that between 1882 and 1930, black Floridians suffered the highest lynching rate of any state in the U.S. African Americans were murdered for some of the most unimaginable reasons; labor organizing, “accepting lower paying” wages for traditional ‘white’ jobs, registering to vote, owning desirable land, declining to step aside when whites approach, “and failing to show deference to whites.”<sup>16</sup> Through any means possible, Jim Crow mocked blacks’ longing for American democratic inclusion. White supremacist doctrine perpetuated injustices and poverty for African Americans through the continued exclusion from U.S. cultural, political, and social realms. Furthermore, white power denied adequate economic opportunities for black self-determination and autonomy. The majority of southern whites wanted a “civil death sentence”

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<sup>14</sup> Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 56.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005), 61 and 63.

for blacks.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Jim Crow's purpose was not only to keep African Americans in a subordinate position, but to push them even further down the hierarchy ladder; even to the point of elimination.<sup>18</sup>

As Niambi M. Carter argues in her study, "The Black/White Paradigm Revisited," oral history revealed the blow of racism in the post-war 'New South,' mainly, through the lenses of the "Black or White" perspective.<sup>19</sup> Though not only manifested in the South, characteristics of American racism were closely associated with the post-emancipated region. The South stood out due to blacks and whites as main racial groups. David T. Gleeson supports the position that many European immigrants saturated into southern white society in years that followed the war. Both authors note that settlers set aside ethnic heritage and culture identity to enjoy the benefits of Americanism; a concept blacks were denied since their first arrivals stepped foot onto American soil. Carter argues that the height of European immigration revealed to African Americans just how effortless they could be displaced, "especially in the area of employment."<sup>20</sup> Upon arrival, white America did not esteem immigrants any higher than blacks; yet, eventually, most European foreigners acquired the privileges of whiteness. Gleeson notes, for example, that Irish settlers to the South did not view themselves as 'others' or "victims," but, rather as "pioneers" that would perform some of the "roughest" jobs deemed even too dangerous for blacks.

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<sup>17</sup> Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 11; Howard W. Odum and Bryant Simon, *Race and Rumors of Race: The American South in the Early Forties* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Niambi M. Carter, "The Black/White Paradigm Revisited: African Americans, Immigration, Race, and Nation in Durham, North Carolina," (PhD. diss., Duke University, 2007), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Carter, "The Black/White Paradigm Revisited," 9.

Consequently, the increase of ‘white’ laborers, who were willing to work in any area of employment, drove the majority of African Americans “out of skilled and semiskilled occupations.” Gleeson adds that the first post-Civil War decade was when the height of European incomers infused into the “Solid South” and “took advantage of the opportunities that such membership offered.”<sup>21</sup> Official conformity came with the price of accepted philosophies of the southern white status quo. Thus led to an accession of white supremacists, along with broadened racial barriers and blurred class lines.

W.E.B. Du Bois records that life in the emancipated South entailed separate spheres for blacks and whites, in *Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois notes that “the problem with the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.”<sup>22</sup> He believed that the African American existence “involves an inherent complexity and a tragic potential.” This explanation stemmed from the “veil” that “separates whites from blacks.” Moreover, Du Bois indicated that racism seemed insoluble due to the psycho-social harshness from colonialism and the gruesome events “of unjust court decisions to vicious lynchings, that accompanied the victory of Jim Crow in the South, where the vast majority of” early twentieth century blacks lived.<sup>23</sup> Leslie Brown’s *Upbuilding Black Durham* deconstructs Du Bois’s apprehension of the veil. The author explains that the social construction of blackness and racism was carved out by European ethnicity

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<sup>21</sup> David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 187-88 & 4.

<sup>22</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1903), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold Rampersad, “W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* rebukes Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*: The Problem of the Color Line,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), accessed on March 16, 2013, <http://www.newliteraryhistory.com/colorline.html>.

throughout the majority of the past. Duly, the intensity of American whiteness is inherently ingrained and unmarked. Brown implies that the black position of the veil included a place that very few whites “knew existed,” and even fewer whites “tried to understand;” yet, “all African Americans recognized even if they did not wholly dwell within it.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Du Bois argues that the socio-economic progression of a handful of ‘exceptional’ blacks was not enough to break free from chains that suppressed and oppressed the mass. Since the reconstruction of racial inequalities would not come from the body politic, Du Bois contends that labor organizing was a major avenue for racial uplift.

Endurance through organizing challenged the mainstream status quo. Brown relays that in the mayhem of early twentieth century racial tensions, most blacks responded to the Du Boisian plea to access democratic ideals through collective efforts. Defiance of southern normality encompassed “a national and international network of” agency produced through black organizing.<sup>25</sup> Due to the “exclusion and isolation” of African Americans from ‘white’ space, blacks formulated “their own material and social capital” to survive the racial hatred of the period. Ironically, segregation used to keep blacks from participation in the American public sphere, actually, “supplied them with the foundation needed to support their collective activities for greater inclusion.”<sup>26</sup> African Americans became more self-sufficient than in times past through reliance “on mutual aid, wit, and hard work.” They used what Du Bois defines as, “social and economic development,” to upbuild the post-slavery black community. This foundation required systemized labor, diversified resources, and collective agendas. In addition,

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<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Carter, “The Black/White Paradigm Revisited,” 32.

black community upbuilding included a reformation in the way African Americans discerned themselves. Newly defined gender and class roles were established in the early years of the twentieth century. Furthermore, distinct black organizations created, and spaces populated, “spoke to distinctions of gender and class,” along with the association of “race experience and community.”<sup>27</sup> Out of collective familiarity of slavery and post-war discrimination, African Americans developed the “race first mentality.” This concept implied that blacks linked “their individual lives and well-being to that of the larger community” in pursuit of freedom from political, social, and economic marginalization.<sup>28</sup>

Only ten percent of the African American population lived outside the U.S. South at the turn of the century. Therefore, as Zieger states, it is not shocking that southern black agriculturalists displayed “some of the most” notorious acts “of black labor activism” documented in history.<sup>29</sup> In “A Life in the Struggle,” Eric Duke declares that the post-war ‘New’ South was construed “by a color line far more stringent than had existed in slavery.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Louisiana sugar cane workers, South Carolina rice growers, and Arkansas, Georgia, and the Carolinas’ cotton and tobacco tenant farmers and farmer laborers resisted tightened labor control from planters. As southerners constrained a harsher and more confined order of white power, blacks organized agency to protest racial terrorism, impoverished economic conditions, and limited employment opportunities.

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Carter, “The Black/White Paradigm Revisited,” 35.

<sup>29</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Duke, “A Life in the Struggle: John L. LeFlore and the Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, Alabama (1925-1975)” (Master thesis, Florida State University, 1998), 8.

## North Carolina, Migration, and the Piedmont's Tobacco Industry

The industrial growth of North Carolina's Piedmont region in the early twentieth century, which included the major urban centers of Winston Salem, Greensboro, Wake Forest, and Durham, was contributed to the migration.<sup>31</sup> The migration not only increased the population size of the region, in return, it provided the manpower for North Carolina to become the major U.S. tobacco market of the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, Winston Salem and Durham developed as tobacco industrial areas "for the world's largest tobacco companies."<sup>32</sup> North Carolina's very profitable tobacco industry, however, did not come without a class, gender, and race hierarchy.

During the post-emancipation era to the mid-twentieth century, North Carolinians generally felt their state reflected a greater liberal identity than neighboring states. Many civic leaders disassociated North Carolina from the "Old South hegemony" of agriculture built on slavery.<sup>33</sup> Instead, state leaders promoted the growth of industry built upon free labor. For example, Republican David H. Blair, from Washington D.C., wrote to the editor of the *Ashville Times*, on 10 September 1928, to object to an article printed the previous Saturday. Blair was upset that the newspaper excerpt read, "One Republican Admits Al Smith Will Carry N.C.," and "David H. Blair Concedes Daily Gains are made by Democrats." He claimed both notions were untrue. The Republican denied to have "said anything to anyone that would justify any such statement." Blair's letter goes on to state that he believed "North Carolina will cast its electoral

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<sup>31</sup> North Carolina's Piedmont region discussed in this study focuses on the north central area of the state that flourished as the early to mid-twentieth century tobacco industry's 'Middle Belt.'

<sup>32</sup> "North Carolina & Historical Background," Bright Leaves, accessed June 14, 2013, [http://www.pbs.org/pov/brightleaves/special\\_tobacco.php#.UbtIMb7D\\_IU](http://www.pbs.org/pov/brightleaves/special_tobacco.php#.UbtIMb7D_IU).

<sup>33</sup> Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 13.

vote for Mr. Hoover,” in the upcoming election, and by doing so “it will be the greatest thing that has happen to North Carolina as well as the nation.” He continued to suggest that if North Carolina showed “its independence” and broke “away from the Solid South it would focus the eyes of the whole nation upon it.” Additionally, Blair said that North Carolina made “tremendous progress,” industrially, “in the last few years;” yet, “the world has not found out.” Political liberty from the Solid South was thought to catch international headlines, which, in return, would result in attention “worth millions to the State in the way of advertisements.”<sup>34</sup> A noticeable aspect from Blair’s letter is that he omitted denying or breaking from the Solid South’s raciest ideology. The Republican only noted that if North Carolina appeared liberal in the media through support of Republican Party nominee Herbert Hoover then financial advantages for the state would come.

William Fonvielle, a black college student from North Carolina, also supported the idea that the state was more progressive than other parts of the South. Around the turn of the century, Fonvielle took a train across the southern U.S. to explore the phenomena of Jim Crow. The college student experienced segregated waiting rooms in South Carolina and deep rooted prejudices in Georgia. When the train entered Alabama, Fonvielle “was forced to ride in his first Jim Crow car.” Jim Crow enforcement was spotty in areas of Tennessee as some trains mandated race separation and others did not. According to Fonvielle, North Carolina’s tolerable race relations did not come close to resembling the Jim Crow South.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> David H. Blair, 10 September 1928, 1912-1976 Arthur Vance Cole Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

<sup>35</sup> Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 22.



Regardless of Blair's rhetoric and Fonvielle's observation, Carter claims that from the late 1800s to mid-1900s, North Carolina was immersed in overt racism regardless of how southern aristocrats masked the extent of discrimination and brutality against African Americans. The author argues that North Carolina was very much a part of the Solid South, "steeped in the history of slavery and Jim Crow."<sup>36</sup> When the Civil War ended, the South's excessive "free labor supply was gone." A new way of life emerged because, to put it simply, white planters "were land poor."<sup>37</sup> Out of economic necessity, most plantations were divided into smaller lots or sold. North Carolina aristocrats, as the case for most white landowners in the South, gyrated to tenant farming and sharecropping as a mode to sustain livelihood. As the years progressed, the southern black economic condition and employment opportunities digressed. Matters worsened when, "the natural antagonism between whites and blacks was exacerbated by the competition for jobs" during the Great Depression. Often, farm owners replaced "black tenants with white workers who had been laid off from factories."<sup>38</sup> For black agriculturalists not replaced by whites, tenant farming and sharecropping conditions remained horrid. As a method to protest southern degradation black organizing efforts were practiced.

Black migration was not a new development at the turn of the century. From the Civil War to World War II, organizational effort through the collective movement of hundreds of thousands of African American "from the rural South to urban and industrial centers" was

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<sup>36</sup> Carter, "The Black/White Paradigm Revisited," 48.

<sup>37</sup> Nash County Heritage Book Committee and County Heritage, Inc., *Nash County, North Carolina Heritage 1777-2011*, 214.

<sup>38</sup> Keith H. Griffin, "The Failure of an Interracial Southern Rhetoric: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union in North Carolina" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Carolinas Speech Communication Association, Raleigh, North Carolina, October 1982).

outstanding. Zieger informs that from 1914 to 1920, 450,000 to 700,000 southern blacks migrated to cities in the North and Midwest, and settled in places “like Chicago and Detroit.”<sup>39</sup> When the 1920-1921 recession subsided, the exodus resumed and produced a supplementary 500,000 relocated African Americans by the time WW II ended.<sup>40</sup> Due to war, northern employees sought rural agriculturalists to replace industries’ manpower sent overseas. The leading African American newspaper, *Chicago Defender*, “encouraged southern blacks to relocate” for factory job opportunities. Consequently, southern blacks looked to the North for democratic inclusion through greater social mobility, “economic gain, personal security, and educational opportunity,” which was denied to them below the Mason Dixon line.<sup>41</sup> The North, compared to the South, appeared inviting by its ‘presupposed’ racial tolerance. Unfortunately, many African Americans “quickly found that the North held as many dangers for Blacks as the South.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, “the scope and dimensions” of the migration, “constituted a different order of magnitude,” which produced organizing results unlike ever before.<sup>43</sup>

The vast majority of African Americans, however, did not take part in the great exodus out of the South. Many rural black laborers participated in their own mass migration throughout southern states. As industry became mechanized, many displaced or impoverished farm hands moved to southern urban centers for work. North Carolina, for example, had an influx in migrated African Americans during the early decades of the twentieth century. Beverly W. Jones

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<sup>39</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 70; Carter, “The Black/White Paradigm Revisited,” 34.

<sup>40</sup> Carter, “The Black/White Paradigm Revisited,” 34.

<sup>41</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Carter, “The Black/White Paradigm Revisited,” 33.

<sup>43</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 71.

states that the “gainfully employed black population,” in Durham, N.C., jumped from 6,869 in 1910 to 12,402 in 1930, which accumulated a total African American population of 23,481 this same year.<sup>44</sup> Robert Korstand adds that an extraordinary number of migrated blacks settled in Winston-Salem, N.C., between 1890 and 1940. As a result, the “population increased from 13,650 to 78,815; 45 percent of its residents were African American citizens, and almost 65 percent of those blacks who were employed held manufacturing jobs.”<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, Durham and Winston Salem “employed more black females” than any other southern city in the early to mid-twentieth century. This is a progressive concept for an era when sexism was as prevalent as racism. Furthermore, “despite critical labor shortages” due to war, African American women were expected to remain in the field of domestic servitude with “ill-paid work in laundries, cafeterias, and white women’s homes.” The “war service” jobs of black women were designed to give white women freedom away from household chores so they could “work in the factories.”<sup>46</sup> Yet, one reason Durham, Winston-Salem, and other areas in North Carolina’s Piedmont region grew into southern urban and industrial centers was due to the tobacco industry. The truth behind the high number of African American women employed in the Piedmont is due to the tobacco factories’ “dirty jobs” that were seen as extensions “of field labor and therefore as ‘Negro work’ for which whites would not compete.”<sup>47</sup> Additionally, due to

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<sup>44</sup> Beverly W. Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class: Black Female Tobacco Workers in Durham, North Carolina, 1920-1940, and the Development of Female Consciousness,” *Feminist Studies* 10, no.3 (Autumn 1984): 442.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Rodger Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>46</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 143-145.

the large number of African American men that migrated to the North, and because of sexual division in agriculture work, the majority of attainable laboring hands for tobacco factory work were those of black women.

Korstand notes that African American women came to the Piedmont in response to desires, demographics, “individual choices, and family decisions.”<sup>48</sup> Tobacco factory agents also recruited employees throughout the state, which led to black relocation, as the case was for Mary Dove’s family. Dove stated that, at the age of ten, her family relocated from Roxboro, N.C., because a “Duke agent told us that a job at Leggitt Myers was waiting for my daddy.”<sup>49</sup> In 1923, at the age of nineteen, Dove, herself, went to work at Leggitt & Myers Tobacco Company as a “stemmer.”<sup>50</sup> Rosetta Branch, from Wilmington, N.C., relocated due to the financial promises of a tobacco industry job. Branch left for Durham at the age of eighteen when her mother passed away and “there were no other kinfolks” left. In addition, for the majority of rural black women and few black men, indoor factory work protected from bothersome pestilences and unpredictable weather. Jones mentions that these reasons, along with the more important factor of consistent wages, induced “black sharecroppers, renters, and landowners to seek refuge” within tobacco manufacturing plants.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 441.

<sup>48</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 70.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 442.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 442; Mary M. Dove, interview by Beverly W. Jones, 7 July 1979, interview H-199, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>51</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 441.

Dreams and aspirations faced new challenges once migrants were in southern industrial areas. Newly arrived blacks immediately confronted race restrictions. Jim Crow surfaced through confinement to 'Negro' sections of urban areas. Jones writes that "rigidly segregated communities were the dominant feature of Durham's black life."<sup>52</sup> Korstand, too, mentions the influence of Jim Crow, combined with class boundaries, restricted new arrivals to separate neighborhoods in Winston-Salem. These areas were north and east of tobacco factories, which were locations away from white communities.<sup>53</sup>

Other forms of degradation included dilapidated housing. The majority of newly arrived African Americans could not afford well-manicured places to live. As a result, most black neighborhoods were impoverished. Korstand states that it was not uncommon to find three generations of a family "squeezed into tiny apartments and 4 ½s, a local variation of the shotgun house."<sup>54</sup> Winston-Salem's R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company employee, Geneva McClendon, recalled that the neighborhood that surrounded the corner of Eighth Street and Highland Avenue looked like "a lot of different shacks, not houses. We didn't have lights, let alone indoor plumbing."<sup>55</sup> Fellow employee, and African American, Robert Chick Black remembered that his neighborhood, Monkey Bottom, a section of black Winston-Salem, had "one set of toilets for six or seven houses." Toilet paper was not an option because a person "wasn't able to buy toilet paper." Consequently, toilets clogged from the use of newspaper and "the filth would just run all

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<sup>52</sup> Jones, "Race, Sex, and Class," 442-3.

<sup>53</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 81.

<sup>55</sup> Geneva McClendon, interviewed by Robert Rodger Korstand, 1 June 1976, interview E-0093, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

over the lawns. Your children would go out and play and the flies would eat out of it and come get in your plate. Didn't have screen doors and all that kind of stuff," stated Black.<sup>56</sup> To make matters worse, Black called to mind, "There wasn't a house in the neighborhood where I lived that didn't have a rat path," because you just "couldn't keep them out."<sup>57</sup> Though many migrated to the Piedmont region in for hopes of financial prosperity, tobacco workers were some of the poorest paid employees in industrial work.

In summary, African American laborers strived for admittance into, and acceptance within, the U.S. working class since the post-emancipation period. However, the extent of 'otherness,' along with the rise of racial hatred, suffocated black attempts to achieve true cultural, political, social, and economic democracy. Migration, a collective means to overcome economic degradation and Jim Crow, not only increased the population size of North Carolina's Piedmont region but, also, provided the labor needed for the state to have the largest U.S. tobacco market of the first half of the twentieth century. North Carolina's very profitable tobacco industry, however, did not come without a class, gender, and race hierarchy. The black economic condition, limited employment opportunity, and challenges to the mainstream status quo are themes that persist from earlier generations and continue into the twentieth century. In Chapter Two, these subject matters are included in a focus on the genesis and fall of tobacco unionism throughout North Carolina's Piedmont region during the early years of the twentieth century. Next, the chapter analyzes labor organizing and black workers on a national scale from the 1920s-1940s. Additionally, local history on the genesis of black labor in the Piedmont tobacco

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Chick Black, interviewed by Robert Rodger Korstand, 1 June 1976, interview E-0093, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>57</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 82.

industry is investigated. Lastly, a focus on the working environment inequalities in the Piedmont's early twentieth century tobacco industry is provided.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **INEQUALITIES AND THE BLACK WORKER IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

African Americans have a long history of pursuing admittance into, and acceptance within, the U.S. working class. The extent of ‘otherness’ and the rise of racial hatred in the post-emancipation years restrained black participate in U.S. cultural, political, social, and economic realms. The great migration, a means to challenge Jim Crow and economic degradation, dramatically increased the population in North Carolina’s Piedmont region. Due to the influx of black laborers, the state’s tobacco industry prospered. Piedmont tobacco companies, however, reflected extensions of the class, gender, and race hierarchy of post-war mainstream southern culture. Chapter Two is an investigation on the connections of black organizing for civil rights. The chapter examines the rise and fall of unionism in the North Carolina Piedmont tobacco industry during the early decades of the twentieth century. Next, an analyses of labor organizing and black workers, on a national scale, from the 1920s-1940s is constructed. Additionally, local history on the genesis of black labor in the Piedmont tobacco industry is investigated. Lastly, a focus on working environment inequalities in the Piedmont’s early twentieth century tobacco factories is provided.



## **Early Twentieth Century Labor Organizing and the Piedmont's Tobacco Industry**

During the early twentieth century, the TWIU (Tobacco Workers International Union), an affiliate of the AFL, founded in 1895, made head way in the Piedmont's smaller tobacco manufacturing plants, which included P.H. Hanes Company in Winston-Salem. Hanes's managers saw the union label as a way to challenge James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company Trust. The break-up of the Trust, in 1911, brought with it an inroad for TWIU organizing. In 1919, Anthony McAndrews, the president of the TWIU, and James Brown, an African American TWUI union official from Richmond, V.A., visited the North Carolina Piedmont to help unionize tobacco workers into local chapters. The men met resistance from anti-union capitalists such as tobacco factory owners, along with managers, foremen and white aristocratic southerners. McAndrews and Brown were successful in the recruitment of white TWIU members. In fact, so much so that they were arrested on the chomped up charge of "selling insurance- the union's sick and death benefits- without a license."<sup>1</sup> In this instance, the case was eventually dropped by the state.

A letter from TWIU's international secretary to labor organizer Author Vance Cole, from February 1920, provides insight to the difficulties that labor organizers had in North Carolina. The secretary apologized for Cole for not being "able to make greater progress" while organizing Piedmont tobacco factories. He hinted for Cole to stay optimistic because, at least, the companies that are penetrated with unionization "have stopped discharging the members." Furthermore, "Keep on working with Colored people," wrote the secretary, because African American union

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<sup>1</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 99.

officer James Brown, from Virginia, spoke to a labor organizing opponent and “made an impression on him as to what will happen later when the Colored tobacco workers do organize.”<sup>2</sup>

Through persistence, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the TWIU accumulated a significant amount of black and white tobacco industry union members from the Piedmont. However, since the southern status quo was too powerful to be shaken, TWIU divided unionists into separate charters, one for blacks and one for whites. Segregated locals were common during this era. The concept of separated unionists, based on race, was considered the best solution because the union could not put efforts into battles with Jim Crow and prioritize labor issues at the same time. Many unions, however, could have treated African American members with more dignity than what was given. It was apparent that most union leaders leaned toward deep rooted white supremacist ideology of the mainstream southern culture through discriminatory and exclusionary practices. Therefore, racial solidarity never manifested when it came to labor unionism. In “Unions and Discrimination,” Paul Moreno claims that organized labor was not a strong means to attain egalitarianism. Moreno calls into account that before the Civil War, labor organizers argued that liberal anti-slavery ideals “of ‘free labor’ actually established ‘wage slavery’ for white workers.” By the turn of the century, many African Americans often wrangled their way into industry work as “strikebreakers.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, blacks were known to white unionists “as cheap competitors who brought all wages down.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, union organizers saw opportunity as black employment within industry increased due to the labor shortage.

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<sup>2</sup> TWIU’s International Secretary to Author Vance Cole., 18 February 1920, Author Vance Cole Papers 1880-1976, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Moreno, “Unions and Discrimination,” *CATA Journal* 30, no. 1 (2010): 67.

<sup>4</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 99.

Bargaining strength was in quantity; therefore, some unions, especially AFL affiliates, fought hard to gain African American membership even to the point of segregated locals.

To help extinguish flames from the battle of labor versus big business, in 1919, a handful of company leaders throughout the Piedmont's tobacco factories agreed to sign union contracts. R.J. Reynolds, Taylor Brothers, Brown and Williams, and Bailey Brothers were among the companies that did. By doing so, wages increased as high as twenty percent even for blacks, the work week was reduced to forty-eight hours, and, at Reynolds, managers and foremen "promised not to discriminate against union members."<sup>5</sup> However, due to the Russian Revolution, two reasons dismantled the Piedmont's tobacco industry collective bargaining negotiations.

First, not only in North Carolina, or just the South, but throughout the U.S., many of the black and white working class "were drawn to the revolutionary idealism reflected in the Russian Revolution of 1917." According to the dominate White Anglo Saxon Protestant beliefs of Americanism, correlation with Lenin and Trotsky's 'Workers' Republic,' signified atheism and communism, which were seen as forces against the ideals of Christianity and democracy. Even so, some of America's radical thinkers that belonged to the working class were found among Communists ranks. During 1921, the Communist Party rose to a definitive organizational status in the U.S. Left-winged workers joined the TUEL (Trade Union Educational League), which influenced radicalizing "many affiliates of the AFL." However, during 1923-1924, the Communist Party was accused of sectarianism by some of its members. One time accomplices turned to "conservative, 'progressive,' and moderate-Socialist forces" to silence the voice of the

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<sup>5</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 101.

TUEL, along with “destroy the radical influence of the Communists and their allies in the AFL.”<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the so-called red scare, “sparked by” the revolution of the Soviets, hindered American “labor and radical movements.” Within the Piedmont, tobacco factory owners, managers, foremen, and the general white public began to harass union members, which induced a decline in union affiliation. Furthermore, companies hired new employees that received the same benefits that union members did; yet, non-unionists did so without paid union dues. When the TWIU and Piedmont tobacco factories’ contracts terminated in 1921, the union did not try to renegotiate. A few months later, the tobacco factory giant, Reynolds, let go of 1,500 employees, which was fourteen percent of the company’s manpower. Additionally, wages at Reynolds and other Piedmont tobacco factories were reduced by as much as they were raised and the established work week increased to fifty-five hours in some tobacco plant departments.<sup>7</sup> Reynolds re-hired many displaced workers as long as they were never union members. The difficulties that labor organizing faced throughout the Piedmont in the early twentieth century mirrored what took place on a national level.

### **A National Glance at Unions and Black Workers from the 1920s-1940s**

During the Great Depression, many unions continued their traditional stance on anti-black or limited-black policies with little exception to the rule. Restricting African Americans from mainstream union participation effectively silenced the black voice in the workplace and maintained white monopoly over jobs. Aimin Zhang notes that, in 1929, AFL senior officials

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Le Blanc, “Garment Workers Strike,” in *Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, ed. Aaron Brenner et al., (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 346.

<sup>7</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 101.

refused to deliberate issues of discrimination and exclusion with African American community leaders, which included A. Philip Randolph and Walter White, or with committees from black organizations, such as “the NAACP and the National Urban League.”<sup>8</sup>

Hope remained for black workers in leftist organizations. The American Communist Party advocated, and implemented, racial equality in the unions of “Communist National Textile Workers, the Sharecroppers Union of Alabama, and the United Citrus Workers of Florida.” Zhang states that influence from these unions was limited; yet, the African American working class was “aware and appreciated their policies of interracialism.” Moreover, Norman Thomas, the American Socialist Party’s president, led a small group of socialists along with a mixture of black and white tenant farmers in a collective effort to set up the STFU (Southern Tenant Farmers Union) in Arkansas, during 1934. The union drew national attention due to its stand on “racial unity, racial justice, and economic fairness between whites and blacks within the labor movement.”<sup>9</sup> Ward Roger, one of STFU’s organizers, wrote an article for the June 1935 publication of the *Crisis*. Ward notes that after eight months of organizing, the union had approximately 10,000 members; half were black and the other half white. He stressed the fact that during the time it took to establish the organization, there was little friction between black and white members. Furthermore, “some of our best leaders are members from the Negro race,” stated the organizer. Due to the experience of organizing agency through “churches, burial societies, fraternal organizations, and the like, the Negro generally knows how to run meetings as

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<sup>8</sup> Aimin Zhang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement, 1865-1956*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement*, 85.

they should be run.” The only organizing practice that most whites had, besides church, was “the Klu Klux Klan.”<sup>10</sup>

Article seven of the National Industrial Recovery Act passed in 1933. The principle of the article assured employees that they had a right “to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.” Consequently, the development of the American labor movement stimulated greatly. Many African Americans joined established unions, such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Others laborers, semi-skilled and unskilled, in mass production industries like “steel, automobile, and rubber production” organized their own unions or joined the AFL.<sup>11</sup> The influence of industrial unions expanded even more after the 1935 Wagner Act was put into place. The regulation, also known as the National Labor Relations Act, or the NLRA, was named after Democrat Senator Robert R. Wagner, from New York, who sponsored the bill. The Wagner Act bolstered labor unions by prohibiting employers from setting up company unions, “arbitrarily firing union activists, or employing industrial spies.” The essence of the act was to stop employer interference in the sovereign right of labor organizing. Additionally, the NLBR (National Labor Relations Board), a three man federal appointed committee, was established to ensure the federal policy was heeded. The law permitted workers that warranted representation to petition the NLRB, which, in return,” determine the appropriate bargaining unit and then conduct an election.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ward H. Rogers, “Sharecroppers Drop Color Line,” *The Crisis* 42, no 6 (June 1935): 168.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement*, 85-86.

<sup>12</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 130.

The principles of the Wagner Act did not coincide with continued discriminatory and exclusionary practices of the AFL. In effect, Randolph, the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, along with the president of the United Mine Workers of America, John Lewis, and fellow union official Sidney Hillman appealed to William Green, the president of the AFL, “to expel ‘any union maintaining the color bar.’” The official statement from AFL officials, in return, rendered, “The A.F. of L. cannot interfere with the autonomy of National and International Unions.”<sup>13</sup> NAACP papers reveal that, in 1943, the “Jim Crow Union Case Argued on the Pacific Coast” questioned “whether an auxiliary jim crow union gives the same protections and privileges to Negro workers” that ‘regular’ unions do. Thurgood Marshall, who appeared on behalf of the NAACP, argued that the separate auxiliary, “a favorite device of the AFL craft union, was in reality a ‘captive’ lodge” with “no power” unless the union operated “through the ‘white’ local to which it is attached.” Marshall added that “Negro workers” are “unprotected in their rights as workers” and should not be forced “to join the auxiliary as a condition to employment.”<sup>14</sup>

While civil rights advocates, black organizations, the AFL, capitalists, and the mainstream American white public participated in tug-a-war against the ideologies of one another, in November 1935, John Lewis, along with eight other union officials, hosted a meeting in Atlanta City, N.J., to establish an alternative labor organization based on the ideology of inclusiveness. Many blacks, leftists and radical thinkers, along with Communists were among union leaders and official spokesmen for the newly founded organization. From 1935, for about a

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<sup>13</sup> Zhang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> 12 December 1943, “Jim Crow Union Case Argued on Pacific Coast,” Papers of the NAACP: Part 13: The NAACP and Labor, 1940-1955 / Series C: Legal Department Files on Labor, Perkins/Bostock Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

decade, the CIO (Committee for Industrial Organizations) organized dynamic unions.<sup>15</sup> By March of 1937, 1.8 million industrialists belonged to the CIO.<sup>16</sup> Zieger states that CIO unionists “staged mass demonstrations,” along with “innovated sit-down strikes.” Furthermore, the CIO “wrested contracts from some of the most bitter-end corporations.”<sup>17</sup> The union penetrated the realms of government and politics, and at the same time challenged workplace class, gender, and race hierarchy in the name of worker rights.

Moreover, the post-World War II years were a powerful but vulnerable time for the American labor movement. The combined membership of the AFL and CIO reached around thirteen million unionists. One business executive declared “that if labor is permitted to consolidate its power... we shall find ourselves in a position in which labor is stronger than the government...” This explains the repeated attempts by capitalists and conservative politicians to hinder labor organizing. Those with business interests “posed serious threats” to unions’ “recently achieved position.”<sup>18</sup> Since labor was under constant attack, union officials from the AFL and, certainly, the CIO felt that a southern U.S. concentrated campaign was vital to the long term success of the labor movement. Labor organizing the ‘anti-union’ South was a way to bring representation to low wage working class southerners, to guard labor contracts acquired in other areas of the U.S., and to revolutionize the South’s political environment. Organizers sought to

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Zieger, *The CIO: 1935-1955*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), ix; From 1935-1938 the CIO represented the Committee for Industrial Organizations. However, angry with its efforts, the AFL expelled unions that made up the CIO. The CIO formed its own organization in 1938, which lasted seventeen years. The organization changed its name to the Congress of Industrial Organizations this same year.

<sup>16</sup> Zhang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Zieger, *The CIO*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 158.



advance the union cause “through steady recruitment and carefully planned NLRB elections.”<sup>19</sup>

These efforts were not easy as labor organizers faced extreme challenges from capitalists and the mainstream southern status quo.

### **The Local History of Black Labor in North Carolina’s Piedmont Tobacco Industry**

The tobacco manufacturing factories in North Carolina’s Piedmont region had a history of reliance on African American workers, both men and women. Dependence upon black labor was shaped by several factors. First, during the pre-Civil War years, tobacco factories’ “dirty jobs” were seen as extensions “of field labor and therefore” considered “Negro work” by the mainstream southern status quo.<sup>20</sup> Thus, most working class whites were not interested in competing with black laborers for tobacco industry employment. Even when economic hardship fell upon the majority of southern whites in the post-emancipation era, black employment in tobacco work was not challenged.

Moreover, as industry became mechanized in the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of additional laborers were needed to run “assembly-line technology.”<sup>21</sup> However, there was a problem. Since a large number of the U.S. workforce volunteered, or were drafted, to fight overseas in World War I and II, along with the mass recruitment of civilian laborers to defense factory work, North Carolina’s tobacco industry lacked the needed manpower. Therefore, recent African American migrants to the Piedmont region, which were mostly women, went to work in tobacco factories.

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<sup>19</sup> Zieger, *The CIO*, 227.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 441.

<sup>21</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 93-94.

Lastly, a bonus for capitalists' interest was that black women's labor was the cheapest at the time. In Caroline Manning and Harriet Byrne's study, the authors conveyed that "cheap labor could be trained to operate" tobacco industry's "automatic equipment."<sup>22</sup> Since most men, who were not away at war or employed in the defense industry, refused to run machines for pennies on the dollar, females replaced male workers "to a great extent."<sup>23</sup> Black females quickly became the manpower of the Piedmont's tobacco industry throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. Consequently, tobacco manufactures had little motivation to recruit white labor.

### **Tobacco Industry Working Environment and Discrimination**

From slavery on, black women were excluded "from the protections that surrounded respectable white women." Due to the labor bounds of African American women, such as agriculture, domestic servitude, and factory work, the black female "had been the 'mule of the world.'"<sup>24</sup> In Zora Neal Hurston's literary work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*, first published in 1937, the author describes how the white man expects the black man to do the brunt of labor. In return, the black male picks "it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world do fur as Ah can see," explains

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<sup>22</sup> Caroline Manning and Harriet Byrne, *Effects on Women of Changing Conditions in the Cigar and Cigarette Industries*, Bulletin no 100 (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1931), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Manning and Harriet Byrne, *Effects on Women of Changing Conditions in the Cigar and Cigarette Industries*, Bulletin no 100, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 95.

one of Hurston's characters.<sup>25</sup> This belief imprinted into the "culture of the tobacco industry" and encapsulated everyday routines of "factory life."<sup>26</sup>

During the early twentieth century, a hierarchical system was rooted within the Piedmont's tobacco factories that reflected the social structure throughout North Carolina and the larger South as a whole. While gender shaped the experiences of many female workers, race differentiated the working environment of white and black women. White women tended to work in the Piedmont's tobacco factories' less stressful and 'cleaner' assembly-line jobs and packing departments. Many companies even assigned white women with white uniforms to wear.<sup>27</sup> This symbolized the virtue of the tobacco industry's white employees. Deloris Janiewski notes that Allen and Ginter, the premiere cigarette producer of the South, lured young white women into the tobacco industry with the promise of a 'clean' working environment. The concept of clean not only implied visible but moral cleanliness as well. To uphold this standard, the company avoided "mingling of the sexes." Additionally, managers at the W. Duke & Sons factory prided themselves that immorality among their white female employees was "absolutely unknown." The Dukes vowed to watch after the moral purity of white women. As a way to do so, white women were required to be "self-respecting and religious." Records dating up to the 1930s reveal that W. Duke & Sons fired white women whose "sexual activities became the subject of gossip."

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<sup>25</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel* (New York: HarpersCollins Publisher, 2000), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, "Race, Sex, and Class," 444.

Within the same decade, a cigarette factory advert featured white women in front of their machines “wearing their white uniforms, like so many spotless vestal virgins.”<sup>28</sup>

Black female tobacco workers, however, were not guaranteed protection from sexual aggravation like white women were. For example, black women’s breasts, also referred to as “muscles,” were rated as firm or large by boastful managers and foremen.<sup>29</sup> In addition, jobs were threatened if black women did not perform the sexual acts sought after by higher-ups. Reynolds’s employee, Robert Black, an African American male, remembered the demeaning and intimidating atmosphere. Black was troubled by the abundance of sexual advances and exploitation towards black female employees. He noted that with any good looking African American woman “the foreman wanted to pat on her or wanted to play with her or take her out to the office.” Sometimes managers and foremen would take black women to the office and stay for an hour, or so, even though everyone knew what was going on.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, discrimination was present at the time of hiring. The process was similar to slaves on auction blocks. One Liggett & Myers employee remembered that a foreman lined potential black female workers against a wall and proceeded to choose “the sturdy robust ones.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Mary Dove recalled that a middle-manager examined each of her legs and

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<sup>28</sup> Deloris Janiewski, “Southern Honor, Southern Dishonor: Managerial Ideology and the Construction of Gender, Race, and Class Relations in Southern Industry,” in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 86.

<sup>29</sup> Janiewski, “Southern Honor, Southern Dishonor,” 86.

<sup>30</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 443; Mary M. Dove, interview by Beverly W. Jones, 7 July 1979, interview H-199, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

then made her bend them back and forth upon the time of hiring.<sup>32</sup> Once employed, segregation was enforced. Blacks and whites were divided and assigned separate floors at the American Tobacco Company, while Liggett & Myers' employees were racially separated by buildings. At Reynolds, the racial divide among workers gave managers an advantage over employees from both races.<sup>33</sup> Factory managers believed that if employees were divided among themselves then collective efforts for work environment or economic improvement was stifled.

Annie Mack Barbee, a black employee from the Piedmont's Liggett & Myers tobacco company, described that "segregation and racism worsened conditions" for blacks in the early twentieth century. Managers and foremen worked African Americans harshly. "They didn't treat us Black folks right," contended Barbee. Frustrated, she noted, "Dirty work, dirt work we had to do."<sup>34</sup> Pansy Cheatham, Barbee's younger sister, also worked at Liggett & Myers in the 1930s and 1940s. Cheatham remembered the tobacco leaves being so full of dirt that she "had to go to the tub every night after work."<sup>35</sup> Cheatham's duties were assigned to a room with only one window. The room became so hot and dusty that "some women just fainted. The heat and the smell was quiet potent," described Cheatham.<sup>36</sup> Before processed, tobacco had lots of debris

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<sup>32</sup> Mary M. Dove, interview by Beverly W. Jones, 7 July 1979, interview H-199, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>33</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Annie Mack Barbee, interview by Beverly W. Jones, 28 May 1979, interview H-0190, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>35</sup> Pansy Cheatham, interviewed by Beverly W. Jones, 9 July 1979, interview H-0196, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

mixed with it such as chicken feathers and manure. While processing, “the smell of the liquid used in the machines” was just as bad.<sup>37</sup> Cheatham stated that she occasionally put oranges in her mouth “to keep from throwing up.”<sup>38</sup> One tobacco factory’s black employees are remembered to have worn kerchiefs over mouths and noses to protect from choking on the “dust that filled the factory.”<sup>39</sup> The exposure to tuberculosis from bacteria that roamed throughout tobacco plants caused the death of a number of workers. The disease was stimulated by poor ventilation, which induced coughing and contact among employees. In addition, miscarriages were an unfortunate but common experience between black female tobacco workers. Blanch Scott, an African American woman, went to work with Liggett & Myers part time when she was only twelve years old and full time at the age of sixteen. Scott “gave twenty-four years to Liggett and Myers” but then “got tired of working in the factory.”<sup>40</sup> During the twenty-four years, Scott experienced the death of co-workers because of TB and a fellow employee that “miscarried twice.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Scott conveyed that verbal and physical abuse from foremen was not uncommon. She does not want to be misunderstood, “some of them was nice, but some of them was kind of rude.” The majority of the time it was from “white foremen, but they did have a few colored” that were

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<sup>36</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 444.

<sup>37</sup> Pansy Cheatham, interviewed by Beverly W. Jones, 9 July 1979, interview H-0196, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 445.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Love, “In Defiance of Custom and Tradition: Black Tobacco Workers and Labor Unions in Richmond, Virginia 1937-1941,” *Labor History* 31, no. 1 (1994): 25.

<sup>40</sup> Blanch Scott, interviewed by Beverly W. Jones, 11 July 1979, interview H-0229, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, “Race, Sex, and Class,” 445.

abrupt. Scott recalled, “Some of them used to do all that cursing and carrying on, but after the union was organized, they kind of eliminated that. Always you’ll find some people with kind of, no principle. That kind of a person would cuss and raise with women. They used to do it bad, but after the union was organized, that kind of eliminated.”<sup>42</sup>

The areas of chasing and drying in cigarette production were staffed by mostly African American men. These areas were known as the worst and hardest jobs of the factories. The labor included conditioning tobacco leaves, forking the tobacco off the floor, and tightly packing it into bins where the leaves dried for a few days. Before there were machines to compress the tobacco, men stomped layers of leaves with their feet “until the room was filled almost to the ceiling.”<sup>43</sup> Lonnie Nesmith, an African American male, went to work with R.J. Reynolds in 1937 for four years of seasonal work. He stated the pay was only “fifteen dollars a week,” and he could barely get by until the next pay day. After the four years, Nesmith’s foreman asked him if he wanted to work full time. After passing full time hiring examinations, which were also known methods to disqualify potential tobacco workers, Nesmith was assigned to the machine room for two years. He made “twenty-five dollars a week,” but worked way harder than “twenty-five dollars-worth.” In 1943, Nesmith changed departments not by his choice but, rather, “because that’s where they want me.”<sup>44</sup> He described the newly assigned area as so hot that “sometimes you couldn’t catch your breath.” Nesmith only worked in shoes and pants, “no socks, underwear

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<sup>42</sup> Blanch Scott, interviewed by Beverly W. Jones, 11 July 1979, interview H-0229, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>43</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> Lonnie Nesmith, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0145, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

or shirt,” because it would be useless since “they were going to get wet anyway.” Signs of long term health problems surfaced even when Nesmith was off the clock. Many of nights, “ I was so sick I’d just gag” the tobacco worker stated.<sup>45</sup> He also remembered the dust and grime that filled his nostrils and how blowing his nose never really helped. Nesmith recalled that he and co-workers talked, in secret, about union organizing because the labor provided, wages earned, and working environment were racially unequal and unjust.

In close, Chapter Two highlights the rise and fall of unionism in North Carolina’s Piedmont tobacco industry during the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as analyzes African Americans and labor organizing, on a national scale, from the 1920s-1940s. Black workers, those considered leftist and radical whites, and civil rights organizations that supported egalitarianism through pro-unionization were challenged with battles of ideology between segregated and inclusive organizational charters, along with attacks from anti-unionists, capitalists, factory owners, managers, foremen, and mainstream southern whites. Furthermore, the reasons behind African American women as the manpower of the Piedmont’s profitable tobacco industry, and the inequalities that black tobacco workers faced during the early twentieth century, are reviewed in this chapter to help accumulate a larger civil rights narrative that branches out into decades to come. In Chapter Three the power of collectivism from the Piedmont’s tobacco industry workers is captured. The chapter focuses on the case study of the 1943 employee strike, led by African American women, at the R.J. Reynolds tobacco company in Winston Salem, N.C. The following chapter aims to illuminate the momentous role that African Americans had in the spread of civil rights labor organizing throughout North Carolina’s tobacco industry in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, the black economic

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<sup>45</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 107.



condition, limited employment opportunity, and challenges to the mainstream status quo are themes that persist from earlier generations and carry on into the twentieth century.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **CRIES IN THE WILDERNESS, THE REYNOLDS STRIKE: A CASE STUDY**

Chapter Three examines the 1943 employee strike held at the R.J. Reynolds, a tobacco company in Winston-Salem, N.C. This chapter aims to provide a significant evaluation on a local history of black labor organizing in the pursuit of civil rights. To do so, the chapter links the class, gender, and racial hierarchy over Reynolds' black employee lives outside the tobacco industry to the prejudices faced inside the factory. Next, an investigation on the discriminatory events that led up to the 1943 Reynolds employee protest is conducted. Furthermore, a study on union influence during the Reynolds' strike is presented. Lastly, an analysis on Reynolds black workers' collectivism to challenge the southern status quo is provided. The strike is important to the black freedom struggle because for the first time in the history of Reynolds, due to the agency formed by a group of employees, with the majority of African American women, the power of collectivism halted work production in an effort to improve the black economic condition, employment opportunity, and challenge the mainstream status quo. Thus, literally, out of blood, sweat, and tears a collective local civil rights and labor movement was born from black tobacco worker organizing.

#### **R.J. Reynolds and Black Employee Life**

In 1943, the lives of African American tobacco industry workers in the Piedmont region of North Carolina revolved around the class, gender, and race hierarchy of the southern status

quo. Extensions of white supremacist doctrine were reflected within tobacco manufacturing factories. To make matters worse, the majority of the Piedmont's black tobacco workers lived in segregated areas of urban centers owned by tobacco factory owners or managers. This was the case for R.J Reynolds employee Theodosia Simpson Phelps. Simpson Phelps was born, raised, lived, and worked in the Piedmont all her life. While growing up, she resided in the northeast area of Winston-Salem in a black community off of Lexington Road. Most of the residents walked to work at Reynolds. There was another African American section of the city in the southeast district. Simpson Phelps recalled that most workers from here were employees "in the leaf houses and some at Taylor Brothers tobacco plant" and went to work by "Duke Power buses" and "streetcars." Simpson Phelps and her co-worker, Robert Black, remembered the 'slums' in Winston-Salem where most African Americans lived. There was Black's home area of Monkey Bottom, the 'Low Area' with "really some of the worst housing," and the public housing projects called Kinley Park, which was also known as the "Pond." Houses in these areas only had only three rooms that included "a front room and a middle room for a bedroom and a kitchen." Black stated that "people had to use what you would call a living room for a bedroom because there were too many in the family." B.C. Johnson or the Newton brothers owned most of the properties. The few houses that did not belong to these men were retained by absentee landlords who were never around when renter issues surfaced. Simpson Phelps remembered Johnson and the Newton brothers as "real prejudiced." They tolerated no excuse for why rent payment was late. If tenants didn't pay on time then the police came and evicted people immediately. Simpson Phelps stated that all the workers knew who Johnson was because he walked through Reynolds, "sometimes every day," to collect past due rent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Chick Black, Karl Korstand, and Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by

African American tobacco workers gained little protection from the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act. The regulation authorized a forty hour work week, a forty cents minimum wage, plus overtime pay at time-and-a-half. However, “the \$16 to \$20 a week” that the average black employee at Reynolds took home was only “half the annual income the federal government calculated as a ‘minimum subsistence of living’” for urban centers in North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> A hint into worker impoverishment is seen through the pay of Leon Edwards, a Reynolds employee. He stated that during the 1930s and 1940s he made twenty-five cents an hour for a nine hour workday and half a day on Saturday; approximately twelve dollars a week.<sup>3</sup> If Edwards worked overtime, there was no additional pay. To make matters worse, increased demands in work production, along with the constant watch and discipline of women, prompted one African American Reynolds’ employee to claim, “Everybody would almost cry every day the way they would work you and talk to you. Working conditions was so bad that you needed God and a union.”<sup>4</sup> Another black employee noted that, “We was catching so much hell in Reynolds that we had to do something.”<sup>5</sup> By the early 1940s, black tobacco factory workers at Reynolds were absolutely fed up.

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Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0147, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>2</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Edwards, interviewed by Chuck Eppinette and Robert Rogers Korstand, 12 January 1989, interview E-0113-1, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>4</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Roxanne Newton, “North Carolina Women on Strike,” in *Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, ed. Aaron Brenner et al., (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 156.

## Get Down With the Sit-Down

On 17 June 1943, the co-worker who managed the machine beside Simpson Phelps, Geneva McClendon, was sick. The woman was middle aged, had five children, and was widowed. This particular day, McClendon was unable to keep up with her work load. The foreman went to her and stated that if she was unable to do her work “that there was the door that the carpenter left.” McClendon cried hysterically. “She had these children to rear and nobody working but her. And that sort of got next to me,” remarked Simpson Phelps. As a result, Simpson Phelps called some co-workers together, ones she thought she could trust, to stage a protest for the following day. She urged employees to join her because black workers, especially women, had to be treated better. Employers needed to know their actions and words were unjust and derogatory. Therefore, to get the message across, when the work whistle blew, Simpson Phelps and her accomplices were not to work “until we get some understanding on how these people are going to be treated.”<sup>6</sup> The plan altered because someone went back and told the line foreman. “We hear there’s going to be a work stoppage. You better not do that. You’ll lose your job,” proclaimed the foreman some minutes later. Consequently, instead of the demonstration occurring the subsequent day, “let’s do it after lunch,” announced Simpson Phelps to her associates.<sup>7</sup> Word of the strike spread to Edwards and other black men in nearby work areas at Reynolds’ building #65. He recalled that women passed him in the hall and proclaimed, “We

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<sup>6</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>7</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 17-18; Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

gonna strike! We gonna strike!” “They were working the women to hard” so “them women made that up theirselves [sic] in their mind, that sit-down.” When all settled after the strike, Kimbell, Edward’s white foreman, said, “now don’t say nothing about it, but yall done one of the damn best things you ever done in your life when you come out on that strike.”<sup>8</sup>

Lunch was almost over and approximately 12,000 Reynolds employees walked back to their work stations. The whistle blew, but black protestors “just sat down on the little stools that were out from the machines and turned their heads to the machine.” When other black workers saw what was going, most of them ignored going back to work also. At this point, the majority of the strikers were not union members, Simpson Phelps recalled, “but they didn’t turn on their machines.”<sup>9</sup> Even some of the employees that started their machines shortly stopped them. Thirty-eight year old James McCardell, an African American, who from the age of fifteen brought boxes of tobacco to women’s work stations, stood up and declared, “If these women’ll stand up for their rights, I’m with them.”<sup>10</sup> Just as the last word came from his mouth, McCardell fell to the floor. The remaining of the running machines stopped as everyone looked to see what happened. Together, a few male employees picked up McCardell and rushed him to the onsite nurse. It was too late, McCardell passed away. Simpson Phelps stated that McCardell was sick the entire week. However, “instead of staying home, he would come to work and feel bad.” He

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<sup>8</sup> Leon Edwards, interviewed by Chuck Eppinette and Robert Rogers Korstand, January 12, 1989, interview E-0113-1, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>9</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>10</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 18.

went back and forth to the nurse multiple times. Every time, the nurse sent McCardell back to his work area because, according to her, “he wasn’t sick.”<sup>11</sup> McCardell’s death was concluded to be caused by a brain hemorrhage.

Word of the strike spread across the factory. Foremen were trained to control employee grievances but this situation was clearly uncontrollable. An employee died and 200 African American women were blamed for the work stoppage. Within minutes, 198 more black women “on the fourth floor and the 25 on the third floor were standing idly by their machines.” Managers demanded all company doors locked to halt people from coming inside or leaving the building. Union members among employees told strikers to just sit and not move. If workers had to go to the restroom they were instructed to go but then to come straight back. For the most part, employees stayed in their designated work areas. Union affiliates encouraged women to use the situation to their advantage. As grievances were shared, Simpson Phelps, the spokeswoman of the group, contemplated the demands of tobacco factory workers. “More money,” “lightened work load,” “equal work for equal pay,” “better working conditions,” “opportunity for company growth,” and “respect” were the workers’ lead appeals. McClendon expressed her opinion about the benefits of labor unions with associates. All employees “should be in a union,” urged McClendon, because unions take “the whip out of the boss’s hand.”<sup>12</sup> McClendon learned about union activity through “reading newspapers and pamphlets” and, as a result, she “figured the CIO was a good union” to join.<sup>13</sup> In 1943, the CIO was a separated and established union, set

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<sup>11</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>12</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 18-19 & 21.

apart from the AFL, for five years. This was due to the reluctance of the AFL “and its local unions” to organize “unskilled, foreign, or nonwhite unions.”<sup>14</sup> The CIO, on the other hand, was involved in many media worthy labor disputes that included African Americans, such as the Flint, M.I., automobile workers’ sit-down strike in the winter of 1936-1937 and the CIO victory over labor battles in the steel industry during the spring of 1937.<sup>15</sup>

John C. Whitaker was the vice president in charge of manufacturing at Reynolds during the time of the sit-down strike. As soon as Whitaker was aware of the day’s events he, along with ‘landlord’ Johnson, who was also the superintendent of the stemmeries, and the head of the employment office, Edgar Bumgardner, made their way to the department at #65 that caused the work stoppage. One source noted that Whitaker was recognized “for walking the factory floor, greeting employees by name and asking about their families.”<sup>16</sup> However, McClendon claimed that the first time most workers “had ever laid eyes on the vice president” was the day of the strike. Nevertheless, Whitaker was calm and tried to persuade Reynolds employees to return to their assigned tasks. He promised investigations that would lead to “changes where needed.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, not just Reynolds but the entire tobacco industry “was operating under wartime wage controls” and could not increase pay “without the federal government’s permission,” explained

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<sup>13</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Dan La Botz, “Agricultural Strikes,” in *Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, ed. Aaron Brenner et al., (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 346.

<sup>15</sup> Zieger, *The CIO*, 46 & 54.

<sup>16</sup> “Tobacco Documents Online,” [Tobaccodocuments.org](http://tobaccodocuments.org/profiles/people/whitaker_john_c.html), accessed on April 21, 2013, [http://tobaccodocuments.org/profiles/people/whitaker\\_john\\_c.html](http://tobaccodocuments.org/profiles/people/whitaker_john_c.html).

<sup>17</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 19-20.



Whitaker.<sup>18</sup> “According to the Little Steel formula you can give us a wage increase,” rebutted Simpson Phelps.<sup>19</sup>

Robert E. Weir conveys that the Little Steel formula was designed by the NWLB (National War Labor Board), in January 1941, to fashion “a labor/ management/ public committee that would peacefully resolve labor disputes, control inflation, and ensure that wartime production would not be interrupted.” Moreover, NWLB decisions were indissoluble. In 1942, small steel companies that were not affiliated with the U.S. Steel company shared their grievances with the NWLB concerning wages versus wartime inflation. Steel workers pleaded for a dollar more a day. Due to the ascension of steel prices, the NWLB compromised. During war, steel workers received forty-four cents more a day. University of Pennsylvania professor, George W. Taylor, a specialist in the field of industrial relations, was overseer to the NWLB. Taylor relied on the CPI (Consumer Price Index), “an instrument first developed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1919,” which was adjusted accordingly, to determine pay increases for steel workers and subsequent wage disputes within other industries.<sup>20</sup> Whitaker denied knowledge of the Little Steel formula but stated that he would have company lawyers look into it. Simpson Phelps continued to share with Whitaker issues of the overall economic condition, working environment, and limited employment opportunity for black tobacco factory workers. As a result, the vice president told employees to select representatives to talk to him the next morning.

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<sup>18</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>19</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Robert E. Weir, *Workers in America: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbra: ABC-CLIO Publishers, 2013), 424.

He also instructed workers to go home early for the day. Simpson Phelps remembered that Whitaker dismissed tobacco workers around 3:30 pm and “we weren’t supposed to get off from work” until another hour or so. Yet, the vice president said to leave early and “we would get paid for the full day.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Seeking Union Help**

What Simpson Phelps and her accomplices did not tell Whitaker was that Reynolds’ black workers planned to organize more than a committee to talk to the vice president. Simpson Phelps was nominated as the spokesman of a five man group to meet with Whitaker since she was a leader among the TWOC (Tobacco Workers Organizing Committee), a CIO affiliated union. Simpson Phelps recalled that most workers knew about labor organizing but, at that moment in time, it was “a matter of who was willing to do it.”<sup>22</sup> Fear pierced employees. Many felt union participation led to joblessness. Nevertheless, the day’s events spread by word of mouth to Reynolds’ night shift employees, extension plants, and tobacco factories throughout the Piedmont. Therefore, when workers left Reynolds’ # 65 for the day, black tobacco employees from other Piedmont locations “were out there waiting for us, and they wanted to know what had happened and all,” stated Simpson Phelps.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>22</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

Simpson Phelps and McClendon talked to organizers from the CIO affiliate UCAPAWA (United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America) as soon as the work day concluded. The women met with William DeBerry and Frank Hargrove and asked for suggestions on how to handle the next day's scheduled meeting. UCAPAWA members were excited to help employees from #65. The time invested in "meetings, discussions, and training" seemed as if was about to pay off for the union. There was one hold up, however. Tobacco use was promoted as a morale booster for U.S. military personnel during wartime. It was seen as a way for troops to physiologically escape the mental torment of war.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it was illegal for the CIO to lead a war time production factory strike due to the "No Strike Pledge," adopted by the union for the duration of WW II. An employer and employee settlement was essential for continued manufacturing of tobacco; an important war commodity.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the Reynolds tobacco workers' strike presented an opportunity to enlist new union members. UCAPAWA organizers had to be careful. Hargrove did not want Reynolds' higher-ups to think that the union influenced a strike that hindered work production. UCAPAWA officials "wanted to keep it as much a workers' thing as a union thing at that particular time."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the "official position" of the UCAPAWA was that the union was not involved in the "spontaneous act on the employees' part without discussion with the union," along with "the workers should

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<sup>24</sup> Allan M. Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America*, (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 50-53.

<sup>25</sup> Zieger, *The CIO*, 144; Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Chick Black, Karl Korstand, and Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0147, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

return to their jobs, but not ‘under previously existing working conditions,’ which they describe as unbearable.”<sup>27</sup>

That evening, the TWOC arranged an interracial meeting at the Union Mission Holy Church, in Winston-Salem, for Reynolds employees. The pastor, Reverend Frank O’Neal, was an African American tobacco factory worker at Reynolds’ extension #8. O’Neal was not active in past organizing drives but he occasionally allowed the church to serve as a meeting place for union members. Black noted that O’Neal was “close to 200 pounds. He had a strong voice. He was all man. He looked at Whitaker nose to nose. He didn’t care.” Simpson Phelps added that O’Neal was a “roller,” who “worked piece work.” O’Neal had years of tobacco industry experience before he “became pastor of the church,” and, according to Simpson Phelps, he “was the highest paid person in Reynolds because he could do that work so well.”<sup>28</sup> A lot of the congregation from O’Neal’s church advocated the strike. “Almost all the ministers” in the surrounding area supported the tobacco workers except one who didn’t agree with labor organizing, “but his church” did.<sup>29</sup>

The meeting at Union Mission Holy Church was larger than expected. Around fifty people showed up; all black employees from Reynolds #65 with the exception of Janie Wilson

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<sup>27</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Chick Black, Karl Korstand, and Theodosia Simpson Phelps interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0147, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>29</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

and Lola Love from extension # 60.<sup>30</sup> DeBerry and Hargrove guided the meeting. The organizers stressed the power of collectivism. A company will not fire “a bunch of people. If you go to them one at a time, you might get fired, but if you stick together they’re not going to fire you.”<sup>31</sup> The men reminded the congregation that the media was full of news about labor demonstrations that “resulted in higher wages and better working conditions.”<sup>32</sup> Along with the commentators, Love, Wilson, and Velma Hopkins encouraged their cohorts to be aggressive and to take a stand against horrid treatment, dilapidated working conditions, and below poverty line wages. African American women have a long history of prestigious roles in organizing efforts to elevate the black economic condition. For instance, the Ladies’ Auxiliaries of the BSCP (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) were influential in “bringing Pullman Car Company to the bargaining table.”<sup>33</sup> Black women held meetings, collected dues, hosted fundraisers, and participated in picket lines, often as representatives for black males who feared being fired or blacklisted for union activity. Therefore, it is no wonder black women played a major role in Reynolds’ labor organizing. The tobacco workers’ plan, agreed upon at the church, was that on the following morning employees would report to work but refuse to do anything until Whitaker and the

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Chick Black, Karl Korstand, and Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0147, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>31</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 23; Robert Chick Black, Karl Korstand, and Theodosia Simpson Phelps interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0147, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>32</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 145.

committee of five met and employee grievances were responded to. When the gathering concluded, attendees visited with family, neighbors, and friends to invite others to help expand the sit-down. Like so many generations previously, a summons was put forth to challenge the mainstream status quo.

### **Reynolds' Black Workers Unite**

On the morning of Friday June 18<sup>th</sup>, no one knew what to expect at #65. However, what was apparent, 1,600 women at #60 idly stood by their machines after the morning work whistle blew. When a manager asked what happened, an employee, who was also a spokesman for the TWOC like Simpson Phelps, stated that the problems occurring at #65 were not limited to that particular factory. Just like #65, workers from #60 demanded to meet with Whitaker and the entire Reynolds executive board. Since union representation was banned inside Reynolds, workers from #60 appointed Robert Black to be the liaison between employees and employer. Black was assigned to work at #64 but his wife was a steamer at #60. Therefore, she nominated her husband for the task. Black noted that he, Simpson Phelps, Hopkins, "Eddie Gallimore, and a lot of us had been attending these meetings for approximately two years."<sup>34</sup> The meetings were organizing training courses provided by the TWOC. Because of the classes, Black was prepared to take on the responsibilities of organizational leadership.

Workers from #65 kept their word and went to work on Friday morning. Employees stayed until "right after lunch or something," but "nobody stayed eight hours" because Whitaker

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<sup>34</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

never showed up.<sup>35</sup> Instead, Whitaker and Bumgardner spent a significant amount of time at #64 where Black worked. The two men pleaded with Black to walk over to #60 and tell “1,500 or 1,600 ... women” to get back to work because, as far as the women at #60 were concerned, Black was their liaison.<sup>36</sup> Black refused to do so. Employees wanted a better economic status and work condition; therefore he argued, “I’m not going over there and tell them to go back to work until they havehad [sic] some assurance that their problems are going to be aired out, their grievances.” Since Black’s wife worked at #60 he did not want to go tell her to back to work with no resolution in sight. Black advised Whitaker that if he didn’t act fast that all five floors of machinery inside #64 would also come to a complete stop. A foreman coaxed Black with words of acclamation. “Mr. Whitaker just told me that you’ve got one of the best work records of any employee, white or black.” Black responded, “That don’t mean a thing to me. We’re talking about people now that’s trying to improve and better there conditions. Now I’m not going over there telling those people anything. I’ll go over and listen.” After ignored importations from Whitaker, Bumgardner, and the foreman, Black went back to work. However, he did not feel good about the decision to do so. Eventually, Black told the foreman that the plant must be shut down. He proceeded to the elevator to go tell the men on the various floors to stop work. About twenty minutes later “there wasn’t a machine running in that whole building.”<sup>37</sup> Due to the chaos

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<sup>35</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>36</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Chick Black, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 1 June 1976, interview E-0093, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

of the morning's work stoppage, Whitaker never made it to Simpson Phelps and the employees at #65. It is unclear where Whitaker spent his afternoon.

By lunch time, thousands of employees stood outside the tobacco factory doors. Most congregated on company lawns and the overflow spilled onto surrounding streets. Reynolds buildings' #60, 60's extension, and #64 were all closed while #65 sat idle. One worker heard Black and others telling everyone to come outside because, "We're on a strike."<sup>38</sup> Various departments in #8, #256, and #97 joined the collective protest of black tobacco workers. Simpson Phelps stated that "some people came out just because they didn't want to work," but, for whatever reason, "it got them out."<sup>39</sup> Once all of #64's workers left the building, Black went to the union headquarters to talk with DeBerry, who represented "the international union then." Due to the spontaneity of events within two days, the preparation and pre-planning of TWOC organizers was most beneficial for the union and employees alike. Inside the organizing office were "about 5,000 or 6,000 cards there, just hoping that day would come."<sup>40</sup> Simpson Phelps stated that "the organizers, the people from the union, were out on the streets with cards" that morning ready to sign new unionists up.<sup>41</sup> Since the Reynolds strike was not 'officially'

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<sup>38</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Chick Black, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 1 June 1976, interview E-0093, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>41</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.



supported by the CIO due to the 'No Strike Pledge,' labor organizers could only enlist new members outside of company doors. The experience humiliated Reynolds' higher-ups because workers did not go home afterwards. "They were free to go home if they wanted to, but they didn't want to jeopardize their jobs." Therefore, employees stayed near company premises. "That was really embarrassing for the company" because everyone in the area knew what went on, stated Simpson Phelps.<sup>42</sup>

Reynolds' employees had many questions. The main one was, 'What's next?' Therefore, organizers set up a platform and a speaker system among a crowd of approximately "10,000 people" to answer inquiries. According to Simpson Phelps, "That's what the newspaper said... it was a lot of people, so many that they had the streets blocked; you couldn't get in [sic]."<sup>43</sup> The July 10<sup>th</sup> 1943 edition of the *Chicago Defender* is not as generous with the number of strike participants. The excerpt stated, "Fear and anxiety" encompassed the "tobacco city as 3,000 workers went out on strike at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, Mengel Box factory, and the Robert S. Lee hotel." Strikers associated with "both AFL and CIO unions" asked for "higher wages and improved working conditions." Furthermore, since "14,000" white workers "depended on colored" laborers, whites "were forced into idleness."<sup>44</sup> However, Lonnie Nesmith

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Chick Black, Karl Korstand, and Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0147, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>43</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>44</sup> "3,000 Tobacco Men on Strike In N.C." *Chicago Defender*, July 10<sup>th</sup> 1943.

commented that there were only “3,000” non-striking whites left with nothing to do.<sup>45</sup> It is possible that the variation in protestor numbers could reflect class, gender and race divisions of the period. Perhaps it was too unimaginable to believe that women were the backbone behind Reynolds black workers’ challenge to the mainstream status quo. If this is the case, ‘3000’ men were highlighted to inspire other grassroots movements lead by black men. At the same time, the article ignores ‘7000’ influential black women. Though *Chicago Defender* caters to an African American base audience, even collective efforts throughout the long black freedom struggle had to battle external, intra, and inter class, gender and racial strife.

What started as a sit-down demonstration now grasped the attention of the larger Piedmont region. People who were once timid sideliners and those that did not even work at Reynolds, or surrounding tobacco manufacturing plants, joined the collective effort to let the workers’ voice be heard. Though limited, a few hundred whites associated themselves with the gathering; some out of curiosity while others were unionists. White support for the 1943 tobacco worker strike later strengthened the CIO’s claim as “an interracial-class based movement.”<sup>46</sup> One of the speakers at the meeting was the international vice-president of the UCAPAWA, Conrad Espe. He brought with him “greetings from the international union, from President Donald Henderson, and from the CIO.” Espe promised the union’s full support for tobacco industry workers throughout the Piedmont and the larger South. Other organizing leaders, such as DeBerry and Black, took their turn on the stage and promoted the advantages of union

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<sup>45</sup> Lonnie Nesmith, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0145, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>46</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 31.

membership. Simpson Phelps described the mood as empowering. Workers really “felt a union could do some good for them.”<sup>47</sup>

During this time, cigarette plants were where most of the tobacco industry’s whites worked. Even though class issues prevailed, division of race superseded any cause in the minds of most southern whites. Therefore, when white visitors from “cigarettes plants and so forth” came to TWOC organizing meetings they generally turned down the offer to sign up.<sup>48</sup> However, Hargrove took advantage of the strike. He saw it as an opportunity to solicit white unionists while Deberry worked “more with the black community.” Even though, “every chance Hargrove got he was with us too,” Simpson Phelps explained. Years after the 1943 strike, Black stated that Frank Hargrove “really turned out to be an ass.”<sup>49</sup> Even so, surprisingly, the mass meeting of strikers remained calm and peaceful, which was the way organizing leaders instructed the situation to remain. Many worried that law enforcement, local militia, or white thugs would intrude. Even though the police showed up, no one was hurt or arrested. In fact, authorities helped protestors and suggested that the meeting be moved to the Woodland Avenue School, only a few blocks away. Edwards noted that the police even had someone turn the lights on at the

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<sup>47</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>48</sup> Theodosia Simpson Phelps, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 19 April 1979, interview E-0151, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Chick Black, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 4 March 1985, interview E-0100, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

school grounds.<sup>50</sup> The non-abusive verbal and physical actions of law officials was contributed to the overwhelmed number of blacks gathered in one place. Considering, racial tensions exploded in June of 1943 across America. The ‘Zoot suit’ riots occurred in Los Angeles, San Diego, Philadelphia, and Chicago because the American status quo did not accept the “the visibility” of ‘otherness.’<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the same time that the Reynolds black tobacco workers’ strike took place, residents in Detroit, M.I., confronted a horrific race riot that left thirty-four people dead; “nine whites and twenty five blacks, the majority whom were killed by police.”<sup>52</sup> Company officials at Reynolds blamed the spontaneous employee strike on outside agitators. In reality, the local grassroots labor movement derived to challenge the roots of white supremacy.

On Saturday June 20<sup>th</sup>, Whitaker finally met with the workers’ committee and his managerial staff. Black reported that the vice president refused to sign an agreement to protect tobacco workers when they returned to work. Employees showed up Monday morning in their work attire; however, when the work whistle blew no one went inside. Organizing leaders went to the various tobacco manufacturing buildings and relayed the message that a negotiation was not signed by Whitaker; therefore, go home. Monday resulted in another strike day. With the majority of tobacco workers not actually working, black and white non-strikers had nothing to

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<sup>50</sup> Leon Edwards, interviewed by Chuck Eppinette and Robert Rogers Korstand, 12 January 1989, interview E-0113-2, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>51</sup> Victor Hugo Viesca, “With Style: Filipino Americans and the Making of American Urban Culture,” accessed 24 April 2013, <http://www.oovrag.com/essays/essay2003a-1.shtml>.

<sup>52</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 31.

do. Rumors surfaced that about “3,000” whites were put into jobs normally assigned to blacks but were unable to handle the intense physical labor.<sup>53</sup> Production at Reynolds remained at a halt. Black recalled that a radio broadcast announced that “Robert C. Black and John C. Whitaker had signed” negotiation papers on Monday.<sup>54</sup> The statement was a lie and caused confusion and mass chaos. Throughout the remainder of Monday and into the next morning, Black and other organizers explained that the broadcast was inaccurate and for workers not to go back to work yet. Once again, organizing leaders visited “every one of the plants” to make sure all strikers knew. On Tuesday afternoon, once again, Whitaker met with the appointed committee of workers. Black promised to have 95 percent of the workers back to work if Whitaker signed the negotiation document, but, not before. Due to pressure from the city commissioner, the vice-president finally agreed to sign. Black returned to the radio station and newspaper office to declare that the negotiation was truly signed and for strikers to return to work on Wednesday. The stipulations in the agreement between Whitaker and employees included the approval of union representation, which, in return, negotiated issues on race and gender discrimination in the workplace, higher wages, overtime pay, work hours, vacation time, paid time off, sick days, and other “pressing grievances.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lonnie Nesmith, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, date unknown, interview E-0145, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>54</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 34 & 36.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Chick Black, interviewed by Robert Rogers Korstand, 1 June 1976, interview E-0093, transcript, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

The 1943 Reynolds strike had broader civil rights implications. The Reynolds' employee strike influenced other Piedmont businesses' protests. 600 employees affiliated with the TWIU (Tobacco Workers International Union)-AFL at the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company began their 'wildcard strike' the same day workers at Reynolds' first protested. Additionally, workers from the wood supplier, Mengel Company, struck on Monday due to a settlement delay by the NWLB. Furthermore, Hanes Knitting Company and Robert E. Lee Hotel workers participated in their own work stoppages around this same time.

African American tobacco labor organizing was considered an attack on racial degradation, by many black workers and union members, which extended outside the walls of Piedmont companies. Political activism was undertaken as union members assisted in registering thousands of African Americans to vote, rejuvenated the NAACP throughout the Piedmont and eastern counties of the state, and supported the 1947 political campaign of Reverend Kenneth Williams. Williams was the first African American elected to Winston-Salem's Board of Aldermen. The outcome of the campaign also resulted in the first time a white southern opponent lost an election to a black man since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup>

The backlash of labor organizing in 1943 was that Reynolds managers eliminated many traditional black jobs and hired more white workers than African Americans in the immediate years following the workers' protest. By the mid-twentieth century, the tobacco factory workforce was racially divided, approximately fifty-fifty. The consequence was, until then, labor representation was successful due to the union allegiance of the majority of the workforce, which were mostly pro-union black workers and a few whites. Due to the class, gender, and racial

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<sup>56</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 3.

hierarchy of the anti-union southern status quo, by the 1950s, union representation at Reynolds was a phenomenon of the past.

Labor organizing efforts that began at Reynolds spread to other areas of the state. In Chapter Four the study turns to eastern North Carolina and African American tobacco industry workers, which experienced the same race degradation that Piedmont black workers encountered. The next chapter continues to focus on the spread of civil rights labor organizing as it explores the latter half of the 1940s and the connection of a southern U.S. mass labor organizing movement to eastern North Carolina's tobacco industry workers. The themes that persist from earlier generations and continue into the mid-twentieth century of the black economic condition, limited employment opportunity, and challenges to the mainstream status quo are foundations included in the final chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **MARCHING ON**

Chapter Four investigates the expansion of tobacco industry labor organizing from the Piedmont into socio-economic impoverished areas of eastern North Carolina. Since African Americans that resided in eastern counties of the state experienced the same type of race based degradation that black Piedmont workers encountered, this chapter continues to explore the spread of civil rights activism through labor organizing. The chapter focuses on the latter half of the 1940s and the connection of a southern mass labor organizing campaign to eastern North Carolina's tobacco industry. Operation Dixie, originated by the CIO in the winter of 1945, was a post-World War II movement to unionize industries in the notorious anti-union and low wage U.S. South. The AFL also participated in the mass labor organizing plan in an effort to compete with their rival union. Operation Dixie provided the financial backing and agency needed to unionize but it was black organizers from the Piedmont that built rapport and trust with eastern North Carolina's tobacco leaf house workers. The challenging economic conditions faced by many black workers in previous decades and other regions of North Carolina continued in eastern counties of the state, as did their efforts to fight for better lives.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eastern North Carolina constitutes the forty eastern most counties of the state. The largest cities in the area today have over 50,000 people. They are Rocky Mount, Wilson, Greenville, Fayetteville, Jacksonville, and Wilmington.



## Eastern North Carolina's Tobacco Industry

Around the turn of the century, the money making crop in North Carolina and Virginia changed from cotton to tobacco. As a result, a vibrant tobacco and cigarette industry grew in areas of the Piedmont like Durham, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro. The industry was “headed by big corporations such as R.J. Reynolds, American Tobacco, Liggett & Myers, P. Lorillard, Philip Morris, Brown & Williamson and others.” The bulk of tobacco was grown and brought to auction warehouses in small towns of eastern North Carolina, which included Rocky Mount, Oxford, Henderson, Greenville, Wilson, Smithfield, Goldsboro, Kinston, Lumberton, and South Boston, Virginia. Moreover, stemmeries and leaf houses in these areas processed much of the tobacco before it was shipped to cigarette plants in the Piedmont and throughout Virginia. The town of Rocky Mount is noted as the seat of a tobacco culture that once thrived. The community had “twelve auction warehouses and ten leaf house factories.” These figures surpassed those of “any other eastern North Carolina town” for the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, the China American Tobacco Company, located in Rocky Mount, employed “the largest number of leaf house workers” in eastern North Carolina even though the majority of laborers worked as seasonal help.<sup>2</sup>

As the case was for African American tobacco industry employees in the Piedmont, race degradation saturated the lives of tobacco workers in eastern areas of the state. Most leaf house workers were African American and seventy-five percent of employees were black women under

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<sup>2</sup> Resolution Proclaiming September 5, 2011 as “Operation Dixie Day,” in *“It Wasn’t Just Wages We Wanted, but Freedom”: The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina*, ed. Phoenix Historical Society African American History of Edgecombe County, Inc. (Tarboro: Phoenix Historical Society, Inc. African American History of Edgecombe County, 2011).

white male supervision. Working conditions included rigorous physical labor, twelve hour shifts, and low pay. Foremen frequently exploited African American tobacco laborers by pushing workers' production. Black employees labored in a "dangerous, dirty, and deeply marked by racism and sexism" atmosphere.<sup>3</sup> The black economic terrain was influenced by the race and gender stratification of the southern labor market. Therefore, tobacco industry higher-ups knew that the employment opportunity for blacks laborers was bleak and "given their limited alternatives, working-class African Americans desperately needed leaf house jobs" to sustain livelihood.<sup>4</sup>

### **CIO, AFL, and the Southern Mass Labor Organizing Campaign**

In 1939, CIO officials felt, "As long as the south remains unorganized, it constitutes the nation's Number One economic problem and is also a menace to our organized movement in the north and likewise to northern industries."<sup>5</sup> The southern congressional voice strengthened in the

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<sup>3</sup> Lane Windham, "Opportunities Reconsidered: Tobacco Leaf House Workers' Union Organizing Efforts in Eastern North Carolina, 1945-1975," in *"It Wasn't Just Wages We Wanted, but Freedom": The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina*, ed. Phoenix Historical Society African American History of Edgecombe County, Inc. (Tarboro: Phoenix Historical Society, Inc. African American History of Edgecombe County, 2011), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, "Putting Our Heads Together: The African American Railroad and Tobacco Worker Campaigns of the 1940s & 1950s and the Organizing Tradition in Eastern North Carolina," in *"It Wasn't Just Wages We Wanted, but Freedom": The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina*, ed. Phoenix Historical Society African American History of Edgecombe County, Inc., (Tarboro: Phoenix Historical Society, Inc. African American History of Edgecombe County, 2011), 25.

<sup>5</sup> "Operation Dixie: 1946-1953," *Encyclopedia of American History: Postwar United States, 1946 to 1968, Revised Edition (Volume IX)*, accessed April 29, 2013,

late 1930s when conservative Democrats and the 'Old Right,' also known as free market supporters, banded together in opposition to the New Deal's domestic and foreign policies. As a result, this aided white southern attempts to decrease the federal government's role in labor issues such as workers compensation and employment help agencies. The FLSA (Fair Labor Standards Act) was passed in 1938 "to regulate wages and hours and prevent the most egregious abuses of labor." Southern businessmen opposed the FLSA due to its "attack on the political economy of the South," which relied on cheap labor.<sup>6</sup> Hypocritically, capitalists in the South sided with the federal policy that domestic and agricultural laborers were exempt "from the 40 cent minimum wage guarantees of the FLSA."<sup>7</sup> Blacks had to work hard to survive. Thus, many African Americans accepted whatever terms that employers declared. Under these conditions, working class blacks in eastern North Carolina were hesitant to participate in labor organizing for fear it would endangered employment opportunity.

The need to organize was obvious. However, federal policies like the FLSA could not prosecute North Carolina tobacco factories' owners, managers, or foremen for any wrong doing if "no witness could be secured for fear of loss of their job." Before the 1935 genesis of the CIO, the tobacco industry was sporadically organized under the TWIU-AFL. Whenever possible, the union limited enrollees to higher paid cigarette employees to avoid the 'race problem.' When TWIU unionized an entire company, as in the case of the American Tobacco Company, located in eastern North Carolina, then all "workers were included for bargaining purposes but the

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<http://www.fofweb.com/History/MainPrintPage.asp?iPin=EAHIX189&DataType=AmericanHistory&WinType=Free>.

<sup>6</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> Hazirjian, "Putting Our Heads Together," 25.

Negroes were segregated into newly-formed auxiliary locals.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in February 1946, a “southern filibuster” crushed CIO attempts to develop a stable FEPC (Fair Employment Practice Committee). Unions were perceived as abrupt, greedy, and radical by most of President Truman’s administration. The president declined to endorse the ‘left winged’ agendas of “progressive social programs” and “black civil rights.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he refused to challenge the southern status quo when it came anti-unionism. The very strong anti-union sentiment held by many politicians and those that belonged to the mainstream white South was as a major problem for labor organizers. Union officials predicted that northern capitalists would move businesses to the South in the post-war period due to the predominance of the anti-union and low wage region. The secretary treasurer of SWOC (Steel Workers Organizing Committee), David McDonald, reported in the fall of 1945 that CIO officers unanimously decided “the best place for the CIO to undertake organizing...would be the South.”<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the winter of 1945 and spring of 1946, a centralized mass organizing plan took shape within the CIO. The CIO’s SOC (Southern Organizing Committee) formed to lead southern organizational efforts deemed ‘Operation Dixie.’ Atlanta, G.A., was chosen for the crusade’s headquarter location. The CIO president, Philip Murray, appointed Van A. Bittner as campaign director. Bittner advised all state directors involved in Operation Dixie “to resign from any CIO Political Action Committee” because the organizing drive “was to be a tightly knit, scalpel-clean force of trade union activists, stripped of any preoccupations that did not directly

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<sup>8</sup> Warlick, “Organization of the Leaf-House Workers in the Bright-Leaf Tobacco Belt by the CIO,”1.

<sup>9</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 244.

<sup>10</sup> Zieger, *The CIO*, 231.

coincide with the task of organizing the unorganized.” In addition, Operation Dixie aimed to be a “no frills campaign.”<sup>11</sup> Due to the South’s hostility toward outside agitators, the movement planned a staff of mostly southerners and, if attainable, World War II veterans. In reality, however, many northern CIO leaders were organizers in the southern mass drive. As a result, CIO unionists “were unprepared for the social and culture realities of the South.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the CIO portrayed the image that Operation Dixie was in no way “radical, un-American, or alien to the Southern way of life.”<sup>13</sup>

Competing unions aimed to organize the South. Therefore, Communist association with the CIO made the union vulnerable to red-baiting. CIO leaders knew that Operation Dixie would surely be attacked; and, indeed, it was. AFL affiliates portrayed CIO members as disciples of Moscow to gain favor in the sight of southern corporate leaders. George Googe, the AFL director of operations in the South, warned the southern media of a red threat that stemmed from the CIO’s Operation Dixie campaign. The AFL launched its own southern organizing drive in May of 1946 to compete with the CIO. The union’s southern headquarter was established in Charlotte, N.C.<sup>14</sup> William Green, AFL’s president, stated, “Neither reactionary employers nor Communists in the CIO can stop the campaign of the American Federation of Labor to enroll 1,000,000

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 22; Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 38-39.

<sup>12</sup> “Operation Dixie,” *Encyclopedia of United States Labor and Working-class History*, ed. by Eric Arnesen (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1040.

<sup>13</sup> Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> “Headquarters Of AFL In Charlotte,” *The Wilson Daily Times*, May 14, 1946.

unorganized Southern workers in the next twelve months.”<sup>15</sup> Green warned southern industries, “Grow and cooperate with us or fight for your life against Communist forces.”<sup>16</sup>

On May 3, 1946, an article in *The Wilson Daily Times* noted over ‘100’ CIO leaders assembled in Atlanta to meet with Bittner concerning Operation Dixie. Moreover, Goode and AFL affiliates planned to meet the following “week in Ashville, N.C., at which several thousand AFL leaders will open their own Southern organizing drive.”<sup>17</sup> Besides the AFL, independent unions competed in the race to organize the South. *The Wilson Daily Times* published an article the previous month that stated the CIO and AFL received word of an outside challenger “for their southern organizing drives.” The president of the Confederated Unions of America, Don Mahon, said, “Independents also plan an organizing invasion of the South and Southwest.” He continued, “We feel we’ll get a lot of CIO and AFL members to join our independent unions” because “our unions are run from the bottom up instead of from the top down.”<sup>18</sup> Not much is known about the influence of the Confederated Unions of America in the movement to organize the South. However, the independent union’s socialist ideals were similar to those of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World).

The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the South was a response to the rise of the southern labor organizing campaign. On May 13, 1946, the *Rocky Mount Evening Telegram*

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<sup>15</sup> Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1982), 211.

<sup>17</sup> “South Beginning Period of Labor Union Activities,” *The Wilson Daily Times*, May 3, 1946.

<sup>18</sup> “Independents Competing With CIO In South,” *The Wilson Daily Times*, April 25, 1946.

published a photograph of a mass KKK meeting held at Stone Mountain, in G.A. *The Wilson Daily Times* intertwined the photo with an article that denotes, “KKK Activities Seen In Georgia.”<sup>19</sup> A few months later, racial terror hit home for African Americans that resided in eastern North Carolina when a black World War II veteran was killed by a white mob in Nash County; Rocky Mount’s home county.<sup>20</sup> Racial apartheid illuminated Jim Crow “as healthy as ever” and its presence saturated “every aspect of life in the South.”<sup>21</sup>

With opposition from various angles, the CIO strategically planned their every move. Operation Dixie had a budget of \$1 million dollars and aimed to organize twelve southern states. To do so the union employed 200 organizers. The *CIO News* called the drive the “Holy Crusade” due to its ability to provide the benefits of organization “to exploited southern workers.” However, the size of the task absorbed the campaign’s budget fast. To make matter worse, union dues intended to replenish and supply ongoing funds were hard to come by as even sympathetic workers “were reluctant to pay the initiation fees” and other union charges.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, CIO unionists were divided when it came to challenging southern hierarchy.

Some union members felt the CIO should develop strength in numbers by organizing African Americans. As cases proved in the Piedmont, northern Alabama, and Memphis, T.N., organizers that linked labor and civil rights tapped “into the militancy of black workers and the

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<sup>19</sup> “KKK Activities Seen in Georgia: Klan Puts On Mass Cross Burning Ceremony at Stone Mountain,” *The Wilson Daily Times*, May 10, 1946.

<sup>20</sup> “Mass Klan Initiation on Stone Mountain,” *Rocky Mount Evening Telegram*, May 13, 1946; Hazirjian, “Putting Our Heads Together,” 25.

<sup>21</sup> Charles W. McKinney Jr., *Greater Freedom: The Evolution of the Civil Rights Struggle in Wilson, North Carolina* (Lanham: University Press of American, 2010), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 159-161; Zieger, *The CIO*, 233.

vibrant networks of community support that sustained them to defeat even obdurate employers.” On the other hand, CIO leaders felt the issue of race was too explosive to take on in the South. Therefore, Bittner declared, “we are not mentioning the color of people in our campaign” because it will hinder the drive. Officials planned to tackle the race issue but wanted to focus on “bread-and-butter” problems to start. After unions made an inroad into southern industries then “the racial and political education of southern whites” could be addressed. In hindsight, CIO functionaries never directly approached the conversation of “race, radicalism, and confrontationalism.” The stressed notion that the southern drive was “to be purely an organizational campaign” held significant implications. CIO officers stated that they did not want any “extra curricular activities- no politics- no PAC- no FEPC, etc.”<sup>23</sup> The exclusion of these subjects projected the message that the challenging race issue was peripheral to organizing southern workers.

### **Interwoven Webs: Organizing Eastern North Carolina Tobacco Industry Workers**

In March of 1946, Operation Dixie penetrated the bright-leaf tobacco belt in eastern North Carolina. The bright-belt is located throughout the largest international tobacco markets that extend from the Piedmont and eastern areas of North Carolina to southern parts of Virginia. Processing tobacco leaves before they aged and were shipped to cigarette manufacturers took thousands of ‘cheap’ laboring hands. Leaf house workers were differentiated from cigarette workers as the latter was considered skilled labor. Consequently, skilled wages exceeded those

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<sup>23</sup> Zieger, *The CIO*, 160-161.



of little or no skill. With the “abundance of cheap colored labor,” tobacco manufacturers showed no “paternalistic feeling toward their employees.”<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, due to the victories and benefits of CIO unionization in the Piedmont, such as the fifteen cent minimum wage raise for unionists at Reynolds, organizers involved in the Piedmont’s tobacco industry and Operation Dixie looked east “to the plight of their unorganized counterparts.”<sup>25</sup> It is significant that the CIO’s southern organizing drive unionized much of eastern North Carolina’s tobacco industry largely because the FTA (Food Tobacco Agricultural and Allied Workers)-CIO did not rely on the assistance of the federal government, white organizers, or the local ‘mainstream’ community. Rather, union officials “employed rank-and-file black workers” that belonged to Winston-Salem’s FTA Local 22.<sup>26</sup> Greenville’s FTA Local 10 representative, Cornelius Simmons, recalled that CIO officials were present at organizing meetings; yet, their clout was small in comparison to FTA-CIO organizers from the Piedmont.<sup>27</sup> One such union member and Operation Dixie organizer was African American Marie Jackson Winston. Winston stated she “was just about like some of the people in 10. I guess that’s why I

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<sup>24</sup> Robert P. Warlick, “Organization of the Leaf-House Workers in the Bright-Leaf Tobacco Belt by the CIO,” in *“It Wasn’t Just Wages We Wanted, but Freedom”: The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina*, ed. Phoenix Historical Society African American History of Edgecombe County, Inc. (Tarboro: Phoenix Historical Society, Inc. African American History of Edgecombe County, 2011), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 289.

<sup>26</sup> Lane Windham, “Greenhands: A History of Local 10 of the Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Allied Workers of America in Greenville, NC, 1946” (Senior thesis, Duke University, 1991), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Cornelius Simmons, interviewed by Lane Windham, 2 September 1990, interview E-0158, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

could relate to them.” In addition, Winston claimed that similarities in working environment grievances between the Piedmont and eastern North Carolina tobacco workers were uncanny.<sup>28</sup>

The spread of the AFL’s southern organizing campaign also touched eastern North Carolina. In March 1946, TWIU-AFL representative Dr. R.A. Young, a well-known female professor at Shaw University, met with black workers Aaron Best, Harvey Moore, and Chester Newkirk from Export Leaf, in Wilson, to discuss employee grievances and how unions helped the working class. The gathering led to the birth of TWIU’s “Local 259 at Export Leaf, the leading tobacco local in Wilson.” Affiliates of Local 259 reached out to employees at five other tobacco leaf houses in the area. As a result, “Locals 260, 268, 270, 271, and 272” formed. The TWIU-AFL won union contracts at six out of seven tobacco factories in Wilson and one factory in Rocky Mount, which was Liggett & Myers. In comparison, the FTA-CIO’s Operation Dixie campaign won twenty-five tobacco factory NLRB elections in North Carolina and Virginia. The largest factory was China American Tobacco Company in Rocky Mount.<sup>29</sup>

In July of 1946, African American Operation Dixie advocates and CIO organizers from the Piedmont’s Local 22, James H. Anderson and L.S. Graham, looked to Reverend O.J. Rooks, the Greenville NAACP president, for help organizing the town’s tobacco industry employees. Rooks contacted as many black workers as possible.<sup>30</sup> Anderson and Graham persuaded many

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<sup>28</sup> Marie Jackson Winston, interviewed by Lane Windham, 27 September 1990, interview E-0169, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>29</sup> Jim Wrenn, “Introduction,” in *“It Wasn’t Just Wages We Wanted, but Freedom”: The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina*, ed. Phoenix Historical Society African American History of Edgecombe County, Inc. (Tarboro: Phoenix Historical Society, Inc. African American History of Edgecombe County, 2011), 1-2.

unorganized employees to sign union cards. As a result, the NLRB held union representation elections in Greenville. This was the first time that many African American women and men “voted in any federal election because Jim Crow robbed them of their electoral rights.” Of course, opposition surfaced. Tobacco factory managers and foremen did their best to intimidate employees in hopes that workers would vote against unionization. Annie Little described that a foreman pulled her aside to persuade her to tell co-workers that they had to vote no to unionism, or to vote for the AFL, so they would still have a job. “If the CIO come in here, they’re going to close the plant down,” threatened the foreman.<sup>31</sup> In comparison, FTA-CIO officials advocated the message “that they needed union representatives who were not afraid of whites.”<sup>32</sup>

Many local civil rights organizations that understood the connection between race and economic equality supported Operation Dixie and FTA-CIO organizers. The Greenville NAACP wrote a letter that urged “workers to vote for the CIO because, ‘it works in harmony with the NAACP for...a higher standard of living, because it fights for true democracy...it works for a better relationship between the races...Join the CIO today and increase your pay.’”<sup>33</sup> The TWIU-AFL only half-heartedly attempted to organize black leaf house employees before the mid-1940s. However, they certainly ignored organizing seasonal employees all together. Ironically, it

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<sup>30</sup> Franz E. Daniel, “Staff Assignments,” 1 July 1946, in Operation Dixie: The C.I.O. Organizing Committee Papers 1946-1953, D.H. Hill Library, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C.

<sup>31</sup> Windham, “Opportunities Reconsidered,” 6.

<sup>32</sup> Annie Little, interviewed by Lane Windham, 15 October 1990, interview E-0137, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>33</sup> Windham, “Opportunities Reconsidered,” 6.

was when Operation Dixie organizers turned their sights to eastern North Carolina that the AFL waged a serious campaign to unionize previously ignored workers.<sup>34</sup>

The AFL took devious measures to win representation in eastern North Carolina tobacco factories because the “social equality and 65-75 cents minimum promise of the opponents” was quite attractive. Many union deals were made behind closed doors due to threats about the CIO. One company, for example, signed a union agreement with TWIU-AFL organizers when less than half of the employees were at work “and only two of the five departments were in operation.” FTA-CIO officials retaliated by using the TWIU’s segregated auxiliaries against them. Leaflets were distributed that questioned “a union that discriminates” against race. Nonetheless, the CIO was not monolithic in its ideals concerning race and economic justice. William Smith, the North Carolina director of the CIO and Operation Dixie, demanded the FTA to stop distribution of a leaflet that appealed to the use of “civil rights to organize African-American tobacco workers,” for fear it would negatively affect “the CIO’s drive among white textile workers.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite obstacles, the CIO’s Operation Dixie, was a large success in eastern North Carolina. The FTA-CIO was victorious in 25 out of 27 elections and enrolled 10,000 unionists by the end of 1946. Unlike the TWIU-AFL, the FTA-CIO’s rank-and-file interracial locals negotiated with tobacco industry higher-ups. Consequently, factory managers bargained “with people with whom they’d never eat with or sit next to on a bus.”<sup>36</sup> Robert Black stated that the

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<sup>34</sup> Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Challenge and Change: The History of the Tobacco Workers International Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 113.

<sup>35</sup> Windham, “Opportunities Reconsidered,” 7-8.

union's role was larger than an increased paycheck. There were two main objectives of Operation Dixie. The first, explained Black, "was to organize the tobacco workers;" then, "bring the local leadership and the masses of people to a point where" their 'militancy' would be so developed that they could care for themselves. This involved "people registering to vote and electing people to the city council" etc... Black also noted that through organizing, African Americans engaged in political and social realms that they never participated in before; hence, a taste of democratic inclusion through labor organizing.<sup>37</sup>

In close, since tobacco laborers in the east of the state suffered immensely due to "low standards of leaf houses, wages, and working conditions," word of the post-war southern mass organizing campaign spread rapidly.<sup>38</sup> Theoretically, local unions aimed to improve socio-economic conditions for black and white workers in the South; thus, intertwined labor issues with larger civil rights topics. By the mid-twentieth century, labor organizing was a powerful force within North Carolina's tobacco industry. Employee grievances spawned action from, mainly, the CIO and AFL unions. Improved black economic conditions, advanced employment opportunities, and challenges to the mainstream status quo were major concerns of African American for which labor union representatives bargained. Through the CIO's southern mass labor organizing campaign, Operation Dixie, and the AFL's attempt to do the same, approximately thirty tobacco factories in eastern North Carolina between Rocky Mount, Oxford, Henderson, Greenville, Wilson, Smithfield, Goldsboro, Kinston, Lumberton, and South Boston,

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<sup>36</sup> Windham, "Opportunities Reconsidered," 8.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Black, interviewed by Lane Windham, 29 April 1990, interview E-0105, cassette, Southern Oral History Collection Center for the Study of the American South, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>38</sup> Korstand, *Civil Right Unionism*, 289.

V.A. “secured union contracts.”<sup>39</sup> However, due to limitations inflicted by the South’s dominate white supremacist and anti-union ideology, which extended into the class, gender, and race hierarchy of North Carolina’s tobacco industry, by 1953, the demise of Operation Dixie was apparent.

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<sup>39</sup> “Marker Text: Operation Dixie.”

## CONCLUSION

The rise of racial hatred and Jim Crow throughout the U.S. South prevented African Americans from the full rights entitled to them as citizens. Jim Crow mocked African American desires for democratic inclusion with restricted participation in cultural, political, and social realms. White supremacy even denied adequate economic opportunities for African American self-determination and autonomy. Nevertheless, African Americans undertook many collective efforts to counter white power.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the regional and local labor organizing movements of union members and many southern black workers proved to be important efforts to challenge the discrimination of Jim Crow, especially the dire economic conditions of black workers. The 1943 tobacco workers' strike held at R.J. Reynolds, in Winston-Salem, resulted from the saturation of discrimination in the lives of black employees outside the tobacco company, along with prejudices faced inside the factory. While organizing to improve livelihood was not new for African Americans in 1943, the strike was important to the black freedom struggle because for the first time in the history of Reynolds, due to agency formed by a group of employees, with the majority of African American women, the power of collectivism halted work production in an effort to challenge permeated white supremacist doctrine. The challenging economic conditions faced by many black workers in previous decades and other regions of North Carolina continued in eastern areas of the state, as did their efforts to fight for better lives. Financial assistance and agency needed to unionize thirty-two of eastern North Carolina's

tobacco factories stemmed from Operation Dixie, the southern U.S. mass labor organizing campaign of the mid-twentieth century. It was black labor organizers from the Piedmont, however, that built rapport and trust with eastern North Carolina's tobacco leaf house workers that made unionism in the east of the state possible.

Improved black economic conditions, advanced employment opportunities, and challenges to the mainstream status quo were the major concerns of African American civil rights labor organizing. Through these efforts, black tobacco workers challenged the class, gender, and race hierarchy of North Carolina's very profitable tobacco industry during the first half of the twentieth century, even before the topic of civil rights made mainstream media headlines. Unfortunately, as the mid-twentieth century unfolded, unions 'busted' throughout the Piedmont and eastern North Carolina tobacco factories. Many of the tobacco workers' labor organizing efforts were stifled due to reactionary resistance from anti-unionists and white supremacists.

In closing, as part of the long black freedom struggle, the efforts of civil rights labor organizing from previous generations directly influenced civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s. The legacy of Du Bois's call for racial uplift through organizing did not die with North Carolina's tobacco industry unionism. In the years that surrounded the mid-twentieth century, efforts to improve the economic status of African Americans continued with increased strikes, protests, economic withdrawals, and boycotts. Additionally, the tactics of civil rights activism through community organizing became noticeable on a national scale with the rise of civil rights demonstrations, grassroots organizing, civil disobedience, and voter registration. Moreover, 'separate but equal' was challenged in federal courts. Du Bois felt the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown versus Board of Education* was "a giant step toward 'complete' freedom and equality



between black and white Americans.”<sup>1</sup> Today, approximately fifty years later, racial freedom and equality in America remains incomplete. Nevertheless, before the ‘mainstream’ civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, which constitutes America’s ‘familiar’ civil rights narrative, less remembered local battles against race based degradation, including civil rights labor organizing, challenged the southern status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 610.

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